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ROBERT NEUBECKER

* *Story referenced on cover*

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DEAR READER

The Heart of the City



Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin with fans at a recent charity event

When Buffalo Bills player Damar Hamlin collapsed on the field during the first quarter of a *Monday Night Football* game on Jan. 2, viewers around the world held their breath. I was one of them. I sat on the couch with my sons and watched as trainers and first responders used CPR and an automated external defibrillation (AED) device for 10 minutes before rushing Hamlin to a hospital.

Doctors determined that the then-24-year-old had suffered commotio cordis, a rare type of cardiac arrest that the American Heart Association defines as the result of "blunt force trauma to the heart that happens at exactly the wrong time in the heart rhythm." During his hospitalization, people in Buffalo held vigils, and fans everywhere flooded Hamlin with cards and letters and donated millions of dollars to his charitable organization.

By April, specialists cleared Hamlin to return to football. At a news conference announcing his return, Hamlin said, "I just want to show people that fear is a choice, that you can keep going in something without having the answers and without knowing what's at the end of the tunnel. You might feel anxious, you might feel any type of way, but you just keep putting that right foot in front of the left one, and you keep going. I want to stand for that."

I was inspired by what Hamlin said, by the way the people of Buffalo rallied around him and by the outpouring of love he gave the city in return. His situation captured everything we look for in our annual search for the Nicest Places in America. So I was thrilled when Hamlin agreed to write about his journey for us (page 56). I hope you find it as inspiring as I do.



Jason Buhrmester,
CHIEF CONTENT OFFICER

Write to me at letters@rd.com.

TMB STUDIO/MARK DERSE (BUHRMESTER). ROB MARCZYNSKI/BUFFALO BILLS (HAMLIN)

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REASONS TO SMILE

Violins for Everybody

AS MARY-ELIZABETH BROWN (below) draws the bow across the violin's strings, a dark and mellow sound emanates through the room. Brown has been playing the violin since she was 5, but this one is different. This violin, 3D-printed in polymer plastic for less than $37 (traditional wood violins can sell for thousands), is part of a project to improve access to music education for kids of all economic backgrounds. Says Brown, director of the AVIVA Young Artists Program in Montreal: "It's my hope that future music students will find these instruments engaging to make, easy to play and an inspiring start to their musical journeys."



COURTESY OF MARY-ELIZABETH BROWN

EVERYDAY HEROES

Braving the Elements

When a small plane crashes into a frozen creek, a kayaker must navigate the ice to save the pilot

BY *Bill Hangley Jr.*

IMAGINE SITTING IN your breakfast nook having a cup of coffee when all of a sudden you see someone about to die. What would you do? Last Christmas, John Gelinne found out.

On Dec. 26, Gelinne, 60, was gazing out the back windows of his home in Edgewater, Maryland, at frozen Beards Creek. Children and grandchildren bustled around the house. That's when Gelinne's daughter, Aimee DeMayo, spotted the Piper Cherokee.

"Look!" she cried. Gelinne looked up just in time to see a small aircraft a few hundred yards away, losing altitude.

As the plane disappeared behind the trees, Gelinne, a former Navy commander and current cybersecurity expert, realized it was going to land in the creek. He flashed on a moment from more than 20 years earlier: Sept. 11, 2001. Gelinne was at work in the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., when terrorists crashed a jumbo jet into the building. He fled the chaos but has always wondered if he could have stayed inside and helped.

"To the right was the crisis, and to the left was escape. I don't even know if I could've gone right, but I went left," he recalled. "I always second-guessed myself about that decision."

PHOTOGRAPH BY *Jonathan Thorpe*



John Gelinne with the kayak and shovel he used to paddle to the pilot

On this day, Gelinne didn't hesitate. He ran down to the waterfront. The plane had skidded to a stop on the broad, frozen creek, far from shore. It was now sinking. The pilot was standing on the wing. Gelinne knew from his Navy training that even a few minutes in the icy water could kill the pilot.

Gelinne tested the ice with his foot and decided not to take any chances walking on it. So he and his son,

PADDLING TOWARD THE PILOT, GELINNE WORRIED, *WHAT IF HE PANICS?*

John Jr., 37, pulled two kayaks out from under their back deck.

"I figured, if it can float on the water, it can slide on the ice," Gelinne says.

The kayaks' paddles proved too flimsy, so the pair tried using shovels to push the boats along. Their first attempts left them spinning in circles. But with some muscle, they made progress.

The two men set off, pushing their boats across the ice. It was exhausting work. When Gelinne reached the plane, it had broken through the ice and sunk; only its tail was visible. The pilot was standing on a tail wing, submerged up to his chest, surrounded by open water. Gelinne nudged his kayak off the ice and into the water, paddling toward the pilot and thinking, *What if he panics? What if I flip?*

With his son nearby, Gelinne focused on keeping the pilot calm, joking, "Just hang on to the boat as if you were hugging your wife." The pilot grabbed the kayak's bow. Now the two men were floating together, but Gelinne knew he had to get the pilot out of the water and up onto the shelf of unbroken ice behind him before the man lost too much body heat. But each time Gelinne tried to land atop the ice shelf, the kayak broke through. He needed the other man's help.

"I said, 'I'm going to push real hard, and you kick real hard,' and damned if we didn't get up onto the ice," Gelinne says.

By now a police officer had arrived and radioed for help. A boat from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources appeared, breaking through ice as it arrived. It picked up the pilot, Steve Couchman, 71, and whisked him to safety; he would be treated for minor injuries. Later the boat returned to help Gelinne, now exhausted, to shore. John Jr. made his own way back after salvaging a bag containing vital flight logs, which the pilot had thrown onto the ice.

The cavalry had arrived just in time, Gelinne recalled. "I'm 60 years old," he says. "There was no way I could get him to shore." Still, he was satisfied he'd gone the right way that day. ■



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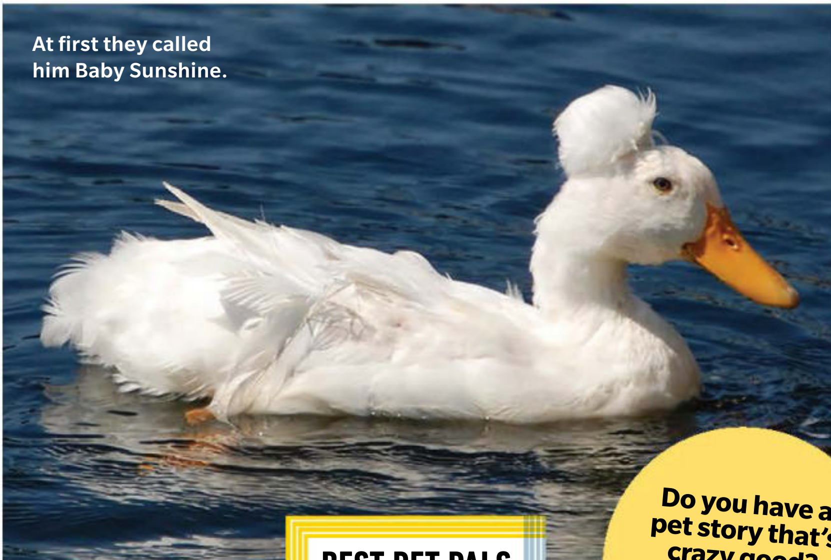
- RSV is a contagious virus that usually causes mild symptoms but can severely affect the lungs and respiratory airways in older adults
- Adults aged 60 and older are at risk for severe RSV infections that may lead to hospitalizations
- Adults with certain underlying conditions like asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and congestive heart failure (CHF) are also at increased risk of hospitalizations from RSV infections

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At first they called him Baby Sunshine.

JUNE CZARNEZKI

BEST PET PALS

Do you have a pet story that's crazy good? See terms and submit your story at **rd.com/petpals.**

Crazy Duck

SOUTH MILWAUKEE, WI

ONE DAY, MY sister brought home a biology project: a duckling she'd hatched in an incubator. "He's imprinted on me," she said. "Just watch."

As she walked away, the duckling let out a frantic peep and followed her. We set him up in a box with duck photos pasted on it so he wouldn't get lonely. Eventually he lost his yellow down and a tuft of feathers sprouted atop his head, and he was henceforth known as Crazy Duck.

He was always vying for attention. If you walked by his box without taking him out, he quacked furiously. We'd sit a doll nearby, and Crazy Duck, clearly nearsighted, quieted down. If I broke curfew, I'd have to sprint by before he saw me, or everyone would know I had sneaked in.

He loved TV. Some shows mesmerized him; we could tell because he would breathe deeply through his nostrils. He loved grocery commercials and pecked at the veggies on the screen.

As he grew, he started to become irritable in his box. We released him on our grandparents' farm, where he could enjoy his freedom.

—Nominated by JUNE CZARNEZKI


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LIFE
IN THESE *United States*

When my son entered his teenage years, he became interested in girls. My husband has handled it wonderfully, explaining everything in an open, honest manner, paying the proper respect for women and placing the answers within the framework of our religious beliefs. So when I found my son in the game room eyeing a TV screen full of bikini-clad women, I called for my husband. "Honey, your eldest son is up here watching the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Special*!"

My husband, up to the challenge, shouted back, "What channel is it on?"

—KATHY ELLIOTT
Plano, TX



Our dog knows way too many phrases now, so my husband and I have resorted to talking like Victorian nobility to get anything by him. "Have you taken the dog on a brisk adventure recently? Would you escort the canine to the backyard, forthwith? Has he supped yet?"

—@AWRITESINGER

Although English is my friend's native language, you wouldn't know it by some of the things he's said, such as …

✦ "Sorry, you can't speak with him today; he's excommunicado."

✦ "Most people are indelible for the Food Stamp Program."

✦ "He's not well liked; you could say he's got social astigmatism."

—GERALD MURCHIE
Deerfield Beach, FL

Jews light special candles called yahrzeit as memorials for the recently departed. So when I visited a friend's house and saw he had four yahrzeit candles lit, I became concerned.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," I said.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

CARTOON BY *Tyson Cole*

You can't scare me. You're not my wife starting a conversation by saying "Just so you know ..."

—@RAOULVILLA

Pointing to the candles, I asked, "Do you know what those candles are for?"

"Sure," he said. "Four for a dollar."

—DONNA EIDINGER
Smithtown, NY

Every fall, my brother's neighbor would rake up his leaves and pile them in the bed of his pickup truck. Unable to wrap his mind around why the guy would do this, my brother finally asked, "Why don't you bag your leaves instead?"

"My way's better," said the neighbor. "I just drive around town until they're all gone."

—PATRICK BRYAN
Springfield, MO

My mother-in-law's friend was ill, so she went to the doctor.

"How are you feeling?" the doctor asked.

"Lousy, how about you?" she asked.

"I feel good, thanks."

She replied, "Who's your doctor?"

—JANET COX
Brewton, AL

YOUR FUNNY STORY *about friends or family could be worth $$$. For details, go to page 2 or* **RD.COM/SUBMIT.**

HE WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS

Before our young daughter went off to her Sunday school class, she told us she needed money.

"What for?" I asked.

"I need to give it to my teacher," she said. "Miss God."

—DONNA WENZEL
Papillion, NE

As he was putting his 6-year-old daughter to bed, our son, a pastor, told her, "I love you. And Jesus loves you too."

She replied sleepily, "And I love you two guys."

—MARK BERRIER
Mena, AR

On Easter Sunday, upon seeing Jesus on the cross above the church altar, my 3-year-old granddaughter experienced a moment of confusion, shouting, "There's the scarecrow!"

—CHARLENE KENNEDY
Reno, NV

During Communion, when pieces of bread were passed around, my 3-year-old grandson asked hopefully, "Does it come with chicken?"

—FRANCISCA YODER
Mesa, AZ



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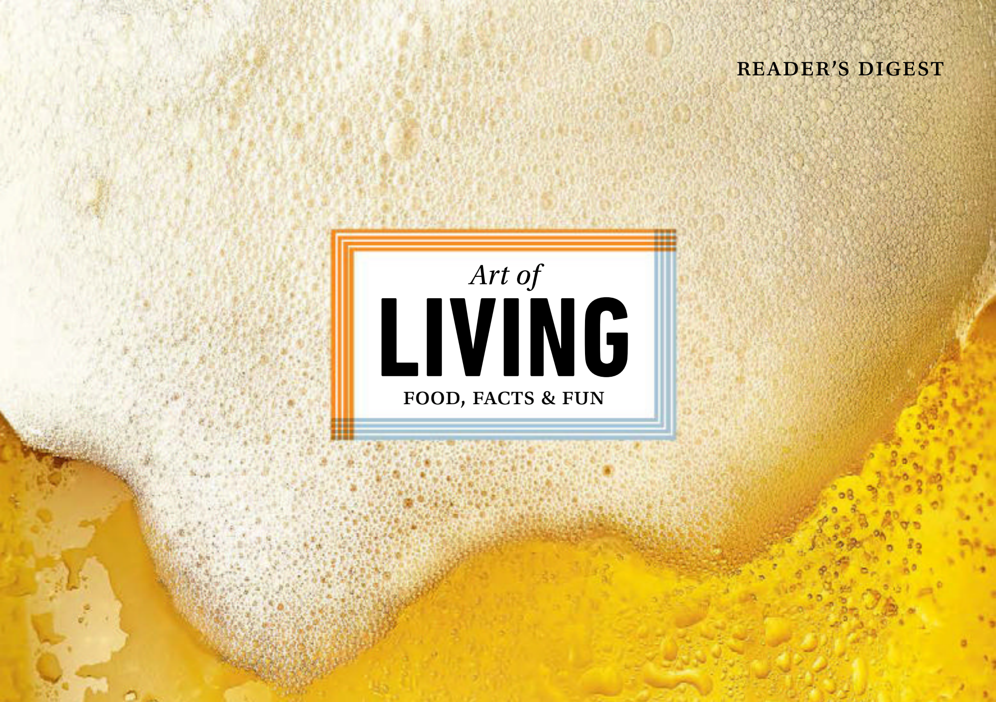
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Hoppy Hour

So many brews to choose from, including beer without the buzz

BY *Leila El Shennawy*

EVERY FALL, THE mayor of Munich taps the first keg of Oktoberfest from inside the city's oldest beer tent, the Schottenhamel-Festhalle. Surrounded by a cheering crowd and a brass band, the mayor proudly proclaims "*O'zapft is!*" (It has been tapped!)

Germany's most famous Oktoberfest draws millions of beer drinkers every fall. No surprise, given that beer is the world's most-consumed beverage after water and tea. It is also one of the oldest, having been first brewed in ancient Mesopotamia (most of which is now Iraq) around 12,000 years ago from

TMB STUDIO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *K. Synold*

barley and yeast. Beer back then was not the same refreshing end to the workday that it is today. Instead, it was thick and porridge-like, flavored with date syrup instead of hops. It wasn't until the Middle Ages that Catholic monks added hops to beer (which they sold to generate income), perhaps making them the earliest craft brewers.

Modern beers come in more than 100 styles, but these varieties are really only subsets of two basic categories: lagers and ales. Mass-produced lagers make up 87% of the American market. These are brewed using a longer, cooler fermentation process, producing a crisp taste. Ales—like the hoppy India pale ales (IPAs) but also dark, rich stouts like Ireland's famous Guinness—need a warmer, shorter brew to give them their fruity, floral or malty aromas and flavors.

Last year, sales of domestic beer amounted to about 142 billion barrels, and imports added another 40 million. Altogether, that's nearly 47 trillion 12-ounce beers! Some 14.6 million cups of suds are sold every year at Major League Baseball stadiums alone—more than enough to fill an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

If you prefer your brew without the buzz, you can find more nonalcoholic offerings than ever. Big brands including Budweiser, Coors, Corona and Heineken now make what are called "near beers" (with little to no alcohol



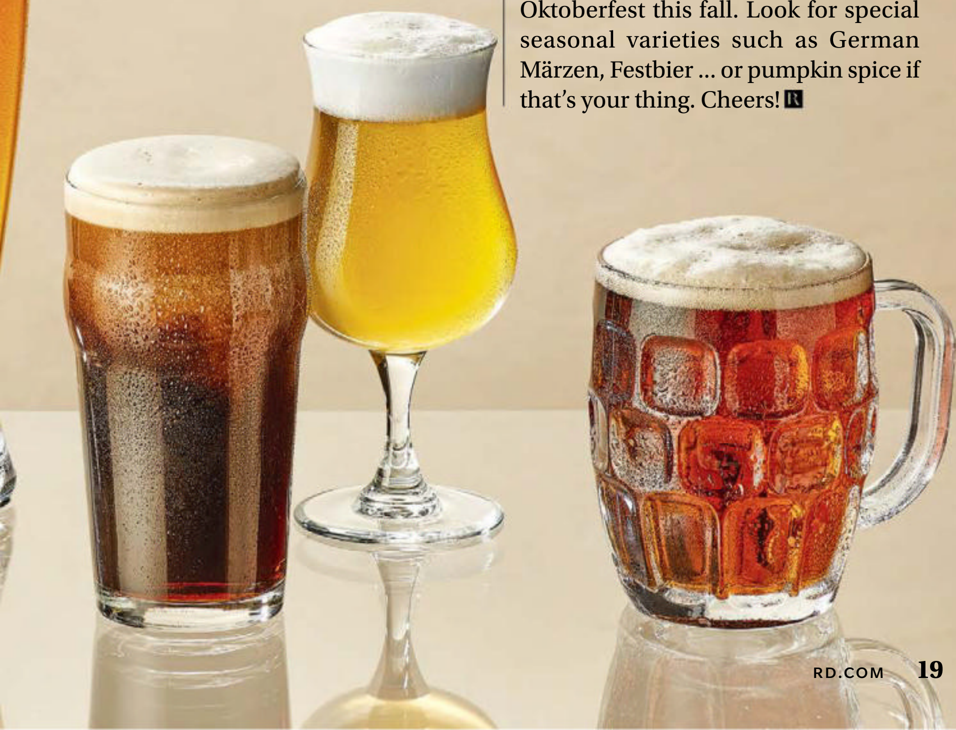
content), as do a growing number of smaller craft brewers. The number of near beer drinkers is growing too, up more than 800% in the United States between 2020 and 2023.

And thanks to crafty craft brewers, there's a beer for just about every palate, some with almost irresistibly clever names. How about Overachiever, an IPA from Wooden Robot Brewery in Charlotte, North Carolina? Or Dawn Patrol, a tart ale made with Atlantic Ocean sea salt at Last Wave Brewing Co. in Point Pleasant Beach, New Jersey? Or Work From Home, a breakfast imperial porter flavored with Vermont maple syrup at Cerebral Brewing in Denver, Colorado? Brewmasters at Colorado's Black Bottle Brewery even made a milk stout infused with Count Chocula breakfast cereal.

Some folks are so into craft brewing they DIY it. According to the American Homebrewers Association, more than 1.1 million active home brewers—or zymurgists—practice or study the brewing process.

They found an unlikely hero in President Jimmy Carter. Though Carter himself disliked alcohol and even banned it from the White House during his tenure, he did sign an act legalizing home brewing in 1978. (It had remained illegal since Prohibition.)

Perhaps you're among the hoppy, happy folks planning to celebrate Oktoberfest this fall. Look for special seasonal varieties such as German Märzen, Festbier ... or pumpkin spice if that's your thing. Cheers!



ALL *in a Day's* **WORK**

I'm a real estate agent and, as part of my job, I spend a lot of time researching tax records. Many entries appear to have been made by someone named Noah. For example: "4-19-23. Made site visit. NOAH." That name appeared on so many documents that I felt compelled to tell a tax office employee how impressed I was with her co-worker Noah.

"Noah?" she laughed. "There's no person here named Noah. That's the abbreviation for 'no one at home.'"

—PAUL FOLMSBEE
Cary, NC



"Oh dear. Looks like your father has brought work home with him again."

A friend was asked how he could keep driving a school bus year after year. He replied, "Simple. I put all my problems behind me."

—GEORGE DENOFRE
Chassell, MI

I was walking up the aisle of the airplane when I noticed an anxious-looking woman tightly gripping the armrests of her seat. As a flight attendant, I've seen a lot of that, so I stopped to offer help. With a reassuring smile, I asked, "Are you afraid of flying?"

"No!" she shot back. "Of crashing!"

—RICHARD SWERDLOW
San Francisco, CA

My mom is a lawyer. When I was 13, we got into an argument and she accidentally called me Your Honor. Never really came back from that one.

—@KATIEDIMARTIN

Sign spotted outside the Clays Mill Baptist Church in Nicholasville, Kentucky: "Whoever stole our AC units, keep one. It's hot where you're going."

—THE CHRISTIAN POST

CARTOON BY *Terry Colon*

Four great résumés that got job applicants to the next step:

✦ A kid applying as a stock boy wrote that at his last job he was a “petroleum transference engineer for Exxon.” His job was pumping gas. I hired him on the spot.

✦ I once saw under Achievements on a CV: “former world’s youngest person.” It made me laugh so much I gave the person an interview.

✦ On a job application, my roommate wrote, “Can make 3-minute ramen in 2:50.” He got the interview.

✦ In response to our posting for a software developer job, a candidate wrote under Summary of Qualifications: “22 years of experience as web developer; BA in organizational management; spent too much time on the computer during childhood.” He was hired within the week.

—REDDIT.COM

YOUR FUNNY WORK *story could be worth $$$. For details, go to page 2 or* **RD.COM/SUBMIT.**

YOU’RE NOT THE BOSS OF ME!

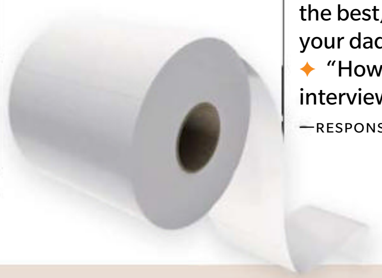
This Oct. 16, as you celebrate Boss’s Day, be very happy you don’t work for these bullies:

A French man who was fired in 2015 for essentially being boring recently won his lawsuit against his old bosses. The man was let go after refusing to join his co-workers after hours at pubs and elsewhere—outings that he said often ended in debauchery. Nor did he partake in the exchange of crazy nicknames. In siding with the ex-employee, the court ruled that the company couldn’t force its workers to be fun.

—METRO.CO.UK

If you have a small bladder, don’t think about taking a job with Anpu Electric Science and Technology. The Chinese company has a once-a-day toilet break policy. Need to pee again? You’ll be labeled a slacker and fined 20 yuan (about $3) for every infraction.

—ODDITYCENTRAL.COM



And then there are the future bosses, who, during job interviews, hit you with absurd questions and demands like these:

✦ “Sing a song that best describes you.”

✦ “Using a scale of 1 to 10, rate yourself on how weird you are.”

✦ “Who do you like the best, your mom or your dad?”

✦ “How do I rate as an interviewer?”

—RESPONSE WEB RECRUITMENT

ARTPARTNER-IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES



Fascinating Fungi

BY *Courtney Shea*

1 WHEN YOU think of mushrooms, the white button, cremini and portobello probably come to mind first—they account for about 90% of mushrooms eaten in the U.S. But there are more than 10,000 known types, and many mycologists (mushroom experts) say this is only a fraction of what's out there.

2 BUT NOT everyone is an enthusiast. In 2019, mushrooms made a list of America's least favorite vegetables, with 18% of the respondents saying they didn't like them. Many haters cite texture as the turnoff, but mushrooms may also trigger disgust for their association with mold. A 2015 *Washington Post* exploration on the science of disgust listed mushrooms among those foods that can trigger a not entirely rational response.

3 YOU DON'T have to eat mushrooms to reap their benefits. Reishi and tremella varieties are found in everything from adaptogen supplements

ILLUSTRATION BY *Serge Bloch*

(which are supposed to help your body adjust to stress) to skin care products. For centuries, lion's mane, Cordyceps and reishi have been in anti-inflammatory and immune-boosting remedies.

4 KENNETT SQUARE, Pennsylvania, is known as the mushroom capital of the world. The small town near Philadelphia produces around 65% of this country's crop. Today's mushroom industry contributes about $1.2 billion and 9,300 jobs to the state economy.

5 UNDERGROUND, MUSHROOMS branch into networks of rootlike mycelium, which help break down waste, adding vital nutrients back into the soil. This network also shares information (such as warning trees about insect infestation), communicating via electrical pulses in intricate patterns. Some mycologists refer to this as the natural internet or the "wood wide web."

6 DOES "MYCELIUM" sound familiar? If so, you may be among the millions who tuned in to watch *The Last of Us*, HBO's hit series about an infectious species of Cordyceps that causes mycelium to take over human brains and turn people into zombie-like mushroom monsters. The premise was based on the real-life parasitic zombie-ant fungus, which affects mostly ants and spiders. Our higher body temperature means we are not susceptible. Phew!

7 THE LARGEST mushroom on earth is a single *Armillaria ostoyae* (commonly called shoestring fungus) that occupies more than 2,300 acres of Oregon's Malheur National Forest. This "humongous fungus" is estimated to be up to 8,650 years old.

8 AMONG THE most expensive mushrooms is the Tibetan *yartsa gunbu*, or caterpillar fungus, selling for up to $50,000 a pound. Its purported aphrodisiac properties have earned it the nickname the Viagra of the Himalayas. Truffles, too, as gastronomes know, are quite pricey: A single truffle can cost up to $3,800. The New York–based company Urbani Truffle USA hires more than 18,000 truffle hunters worldwide to keep up with demand.

9 FORAGING FOR your own might not be the way to go: Many poisonous mushrooms—sometimes called toadstools—can look like familiar varieties, and some wild mushrooms are dangerous to eat raw. Mushroom-related deaths are rare (only around three per year in the U.S.), but you could easily end up with an upset stomach. The best way to forage is to go with a pro.

10 ADVOCATES of psychedelic "magic" mushrooms tout them as a promising treatment for depression, addiction and other mental health disorders. In 2021, the U.S. government awarded a $4 million grant for a study to determine whether the psychoactive ingredient in psychedelic mushrooms (psilocybin) can help people quit smoking.

11 MEANWHILE, MICRODOSING—taking small doses of psilocybin—has become a popular productivity-boosting hack in California's Silicon Valley and beyond. The scientific community is divided about how effective microdosing is for enhancing mood, creativity and focus. But the practice was given (unofficial) royal assent in Prince Harry's recent memoir, *Spare*. During an interview later, he described psychedelic mushrooms as a "fundamental" part of his mental health practice.

12 MUSHROOMS MIGHT even be able to save our planet. They can sequester large amounts of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere, and they produce enzymes that can digest pretty much anything, including toxins in landfills and oil spills. And according to climate scientists in Germany, if we replace just 20% of the meat we consume with alternatives such as mushrooms, by 2050 we could cut the rate of deforestation by more than half.

13 GET YOUR telescopes ready: Mushrooms may find their way to outer space as soon as 2025 in the form of mycotecture: using mushrooms for architectural purposes. Turns out, growing mycelium in molds makes for a cheap and versatile stuccolike building material that NASA could then use to build future bases on the moon and Mars. This funky fungus truly is out of this world.

A Piece by Any Other Name

You don't need to share a language with someone in order to play chess with them. But it's likely you'll have different names for the pieces. The rook, for example, is called a chariot in Iceland, a cannon in Bulgaria and a boat in Russia. Knights are jumpers in Germany, and the queen is known as a lady in Italy. But no piece elicits a wider range of epithets than the bishop. In France, it's a jester. In Spain, it's an elephant. It's a spear in Estonia, a hunter in Croatia and a gunner in Latvia. And in Georgia, it's a turtle.

ATLASOBSCURA.COM



DEPARTMENT OF WIT

"I Like It!"

All the self-defense you need when some busybody questions your choices

BY *Samantha Irby*

FROM THE BOOK **QUIETLY HOSTILE: ESSAYS**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY *Robert Neubecker*



I don't make a lot of goals,

because it's embarrassing when you fall short.

Drink more water? Can't do it.

Go to bed early? But what about my shows?

Save more money? But what about buying stuff?

Lose weight? Is there a pill for that, and, if so, can I take it in cheese like a dog?

Eliminate bad habits? What would I be without them?

I don't have a lot of coping mechanisms that aren't wholly self-destructive, but here is one good one that I will recommend: saying I like things that I like.

At first blush, that doesn't sound revolutionary, I know, but let's get into it.

One of the tools bad people use to make people who are not bad feel bad is the casual dismissal of things good people like:

"Ew, that's your coffee order?"

"You're going to that party?"

"Why do you use Vaseline?"

They say things in a way that makes you feel you have to apologize for liking them, that puts you on the defensive, that sends you down an internal spiral thinking *Why do I like the dumb stuff I like?* and questioning your entire life's history of taste and choices, all because you had the nerve to express enjoyment of something mundane.

No doubt you've been on the receiving end yourself. The interaction can go something like this:

ME: I thought [name of innocuous movie that is perfectly fine] was good!
THEM *(feigning shock)*: You did? Well, I thought it was sophomoric garbage with no character development and an implausible ending. [Seriously, we're talking about a thoroughly enjoyable popcorn movie here.] I can't believe you're into it.

This is where they stop—a satisfied smugness spreading across their face—and wait expectantly for you to conjure a defense for a movie (or a book or TV show or the store where you buy shirts or the place where you get your cat groomed or ...) you didn't make and have no emotional attachment to. Whenever this happens to me, my automatic reaction is to feel ashamed, as though I should apologize for not understanding that a thing I enjoyed was offensive to people who actually know what quality is.

I get embarrassed for being a person with basic tastes, which then leads to my second-guessing both myself and my interpretation of whatever it is we're talking about.

"Oh, so what you're trying to say is that I'm not supposed to think *Mission: Impossible—Fallout* is intellectually stimulating and the greatest film of all time?"

A friend said to me, after using the dry cleaner recommendation she'd asked me for weeks before: "That strip mall where you told me to get my pants hemmed is so depressing. I can't believe you go there."

I leaned against my open front door, in a fraying hoodie and soiled pajama bottoms, blinking at her over my first Diet Coke of the day.

"I can't believe you go there!" she repeated, and it became clear to me





But I didn't say anything, and she chuckled again, saying, "It's so ugly!" followed by an anticipative pause.

And I dunno, the smoothie spot is pretty good, and the out-of-business DVD store is oddly comforting to me, so I arranged my face into something resembling cheerfulness and said, in my highest octave, "I like it!"

Then I watched as she searched for something to say next, since I'd dodged the trap she'd set and whatever further

that she wanted an explanation. An apology. Unfortunately, I was in no mood to atone for a place I …

- … did not conceptualize
- … did not build
- … do not own
- … do not live in
- … do not profit from
- … frequently use with satisfaction
- … told her about as a courtesy because she asked me!

Imagine me saying, "I'm sorry that the home of Bill's Greeting Card Hut and Lucy's Luxury Lashes wasn't up to your exacting standards."

I would rather live inside the Value City next door to Glamour Nails!

insults she had prepared to hit me with.

"I like it!" I chirped again. "I like it! I like it a lot!"

I don't remember if I slammed the door in her face or kicked her down my cement steps, but what I do know is, that day a new person was born—an upgraded version of myself that no longer felt shamed by some smarty-pants making fun of the John Grisham novel poking out of my backpack.

We live in a time where everyone is just hurling expectations of justification at each other constantly. I have no idea what news is real or which celebrity is an actual good person or what zeitgeisty show most deserves my attention or which cause is the correct one for me to text my $10 to, but I do know that if I pick

the wrong one, someone I don't know very well, or maybe don't know at all, is going to demand to know "*Why?*"

You can use "I like it!" (the exclamation point is necessary) any time some freak questions a regular old thing you enjoy, and it'll swipe their legs out from under them every single time. Deploy it whenever you want, then sit back and watch your judgmental friend splutter and try to choke out a response, because what people like that really want is to show off how much more cultured and evolved they are than you, and saying "I like it!" (include the exclamation point—I mean it!) robs them of that opportunity.

They want to fight and pick apart the shaky defense you had to come up with on the fly for, I don't know, the place you get coffee from just because it's close to your house? Let's practice:

"Why are you listening to Justin Bieber?"

I like it!

"I can't believe you drink milk."

I like it!

"Gross, you still use Instagram?"

I like it!

"That shirt is so ugly."

I like it!

"You're watching that dumb show again?"

I like it!

"Your dog is so naughty."

I like it!

"Ugh, another Samantha Irby book?"

I like it!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

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HUMOR *in* UNIFORM

My colleague at the Defense Language Institute is an elegant middle-aged woman who was born and raised in Russia. Like many Russian women, she likes her fur coats. One day, as we left a building where we had trained a select group of military linguists, some strangers noticed my friend's fur and shouted, "What poor creature had to be sacrificed so that you could have this fur coat?"

My unruffled colleague replied, "My mother-in-law."

—YEFIM M. BRODD
Kirkland, WA



"I think he's trolling you."

Who Knew?

✦ A military working dog is always one rank higher than its handler. Some say the custom was implemented to prevent handlers from mistreating their dogs.

✦ Fewer than 100 recipients have been granted the title of Honorary Marine. The list includes Brig. Gen. Bob Hope, Master Sgt. Bugs Bunny and Cpl. Jim Nabors, star of the sitcom *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.*

✦ The license plate of the commandant of the Marine Corps reads 1775—the year the Corps was founded.

—ARMY.MIL; USO.ORG

When I was in pilot training at Laredo Air Force Base in 1972, there was a closet in the hallway of the officers' quarters. On the door was a sign: Officer Storage. Underneath, someone had scribbled, "So that's where they keep them."

—DALE "BOOTS" HILL
Canton, GA

YOUR FUNNY MILITARY *story could be worth $$$. For details, go to page 2 or* **RD.COM/SUBMIT.**

CARTOON BY *Scott Masear*

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The

HEALTHY

WELLNESS FROM THEHEALTHY.COM

Play (Pickle) Ball!

How to get in on the game—if you haven't already

BY *Karen Robock*

UNTIL RECENTLY, no one had heard of this game with the crazy name. Last year in the United States, nearly 5 million people played the friendly racquet sport on courts around the country. There's even a major league for pickleball, MLP for short, with pro athletes Tom Brady, Kim Clijsters and LeBron James counted among the team owners. The International Federation of Pickleball, with 60 member countries and counting, is working to make sure pickleball

ILLUSTRATIONS BY *Kate Traynor*

will be part of the 2028 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

If you haven't played it yourself, you've probably at least heard of pickleball. Here's how the game is played.

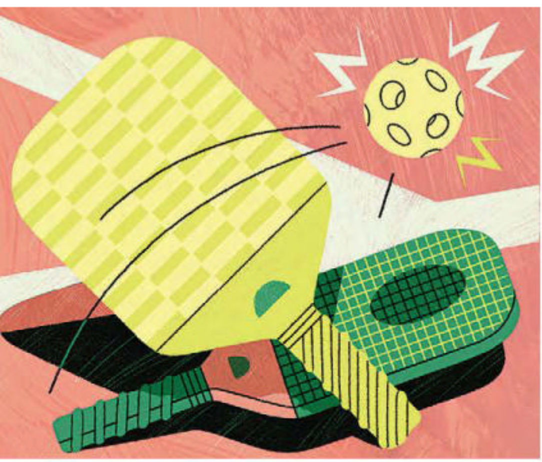
"Pickleball takes components from tennis, badminton and table tennis," says Hope Tolley, managing director of recreational programs for USA Pickleball. It's played on a badminton-sized court with a slightly lowered tennis net, using square paddles and a small perforated plastic ball that's similar in size to a tennis ball, but much lighter. Since the lighter ball doesn't bounce as much, it's easier to get a rally going.

Unlike tennis, you can score only when it's your turn to serve. The goal is to keep the ball in the air, and if your opponent (called the receiver) fails to return the ball over the net, either from the serve or in a rally, you get the point. Be sure to hit with enough force or you'll end up with a *falafel*—pickleball slang for a shot that falls short of the net. Matches can be played in doubles or singles, and games are played to 11 points (and must be won by a margin of at least 2 points). Lose with a score of 11-0 and you've been "pickled"!

Whether you play regularly—and consider yourself a "pickler"—or only once in a while, it's a very social game and a perfect way to make new friends, says Tolley. "It's a sport that's bringing folks together."

Part of the appeal is that pickleball is easy to learn and you don't have to be super athletic to pick it up. Fans range from kids to seniors, with those ages 18 to 34 making up the fastest-growing player group.

Pickleball has been around since the 1960s. It started in the backyard of future U.S. Rep. Joel Pritchard from Washington. He and two dad friends started an improvised game of badminton, with the goal of keeping their kids busy, using what was on hand: an old badminton court, some table tennis paddles, a volleyball net and a whiffle ball.



Fast-forward six decades and pickleball—the name is a nod to the term *pickle boats*, used to describe a motley group of rowers who are thrown together at random to compete—is one of the hottest trends in sports and popular culture.

Playing the game can improve your hand-eye coordination and

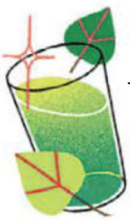


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increase reaction time. And because you can vary the intensity—going all-out or taking a slower pace—pickleball suits serious athletes and weekend warriors alike. It's a great aerobic workout, and because it's a low-impact sport, it's easy on your joints.

You don't need to join a league or have a pickleball court to get in on the action. "It can be played in nontraditional spaces like gymnasiums and parking lots," says Tolley. Any smooth surface will work, as long as you have a net, a ball and a paddle.

People who are really into the sport can join tournaments at various levels. The first World Pickleball Games will be held next summer at the Austin Pickle Ranch in Austin, Texas. By 2030, pickleball is expected to have as many as 40 million players worldwide. Its popularity has also led to increased interest in other racket sports: Padel, a fast-paced combination of tennis and squash invented in Mexico in the late 1960s, is catching on across Europe and South America.



The Scoop on Veggie Powders

BY *Melissa Greer*

DARK GREEN VEGETABLES are often considered to be the cream of the health-food crop because they're particularly rich in essential minerals such as iron, magnesium and calcium, plus vitamins C, K and a bunch of the Bs. New green powders promise all that nutritional goodness in one convenient scoop—just stir into a glass of water. These products, from Athletic Greens, Garden of Life, Vital Proteins and others, are made of dehydrated veggies such as spinach, beetroot and broccoli, plus spirulina, a type of algae full of nutrients.

But is drinking your greens as healthy as eating them? The short answer is no because they're missing one crucial element: fiber. Fiber is good for your gut, helping to keep food moving through the digestive system. Still, getting your daily servings of whole vegetables isn't always convenient.

"I consider powdered greens to be a nutritional supplement," says Maya Feller, a New York–based registered dietitian and author of *Eating from Our Roots: 80+ Healthy Home-Cooked Favorites from Cultures Around the World*. "Many formulations have added vitamins and minerals or other nutrients that don't naturally occur in green vegetables, so they're similar to a multivitamin." So keep eating those healthy veggies, and reach for the powders when you need a nutritional boost.


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News FROM THE

WORLD OF MEDICINE

BY *Samantha Rideout*



THE TROUBLE WITH TRAFFIC

People who live near busy roads deal with a daily barrage of horns, sirens and engine noise. Turns out, it's not just a nuisance—it's a health risk. According to a large study from researchers at the University of Leicester and Oxford University in England and Peking University in China, this soundscape increases the risk of hypertension. The study compared homes with differing levels of air pollution and noise. The people who were regularly exposed to high levels of both had the highest hypertension risk of all. This means that there is a public health case for adopting measures such as quieter vehicles, noise barriers and buffer zones around highways.

A New Option to Lower Cholesterol

For people who need to manage their cholesterol to prevent problems such as heart attacks and strokes, statins are the go-to drugs, and for good reason: They typically lead to a 30% to 50% reduction in the level of LDL ("bad") cholesterol. However, some patients get side effects such as muscle pain, headaches or weakness. Another medication, bempedoic acid, is sometimes prescribed as an add-on to statins. For a recent *New England Journal of Medicine* trial, participants took it on its own and their LDL dropped by an average of 20% to 25%.

A New Therapy for Leukemia

Although leukemia does strike adults, it is infamously the most common cancer among kids. The most aggressive forms are often caused by either a mutation in a gene

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called NPM1 or a chromosome abnormality called an MLL rearrangement. When this is the case, a new class of drugs called menin inhibitors can sometimes turn cancerous blood cells back into normal ones. In an early-stage clinical trial published in *Nature,* 18 out of 60 patients had a complete remission. Twelve of them even went on to get stem cell transplants—treatments that can cure leukemia, but only when there are very low levels of cancer in the blood.



Got a Shot? Get Some Sleep

Prioritizing sleep around the time of a vaccination could help it work better, suggests a review of seven studies in which people were immunized against viruses including hepatitis and the flu. Specifically, subjects who clocked at least seven hours of shut-eye per night produced more antibodies than people who slept six hours or less. Antibodies are proteins that help the immune system identify threats, and producing more of them could lead to stronger, longer-lasting immunity.

A Case for the Four-Day Workweek

What happens if an employer lets people work 32 hours each week instead of 40 but expects the same output—and pays the same amount wages? For six months, 61 British companies employing a total of nearly 3,000 workers tried it out. In most cases, the experiment was a success. Employees found ways to become more efficient—for example, by automating certain tasks or cutting back on meetings. And many workers were getting healthier and happier: 39% reported that they felt less stressed, 46% felt less fatigued and 37% reported improvements to their physical health. The businesses benefited too. Overall, company revenue stayed roughly the same, and employee turnover and sick days both plummeted by more than half. ▣

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A man is struck by a bus on a busy street. As he lies dying, he calls out, "A priest! Somebody get me a priest!" A police officer checks the crowd—no priest, no minister, no man of God of any kind. Then out of the crowd an elderly man comes over.

"Officer," he says, "I'm not a priest. I'm not even a Catholic. But for 50 years I've lived behind St. Elizabeth's Church, and every night I've listened to the Catholic litany. Maybe I can be of some comfort to this man."

The officer agrees, and the elderly man kneels down over the injured pedestrian and solemnly intones: "B-4. I-19. N-38. G-54. O-72 ..."

—JEWISHMAG.COM

When you hear a statistic, always ask about the other side of the statistic. For example, 44% of marriages end in divorce. Now, that's a scary number. But it's not so scary if you look at it from a different perspective. If 44% of marriages end in divorce, that means 56% of marriages end in death.

—DON MCMILLAN, *comedian, on Dry Bar Comedy*

What do you call two Egyptians who pass gas at the same time and for the same reason?

Toot-in-Common.

—IAN DAVIS, *Toledo, OH*

I've been trying to finish writing a book about surviving bankruptcy, but I can't get out of chapter 11.

—GLEN YOUNG *Renton, WA*

CARTOON BY *Jim Benton*

Bruce Springsteen Lyrics That Hit Differently as I Age

"Baby, we were born to run"
Or walk, depending on my knee.

"Dancing in the dark"
If I'm dancing, this is the only lighting that makes sense.

"You ain't a beauty, but hey you're all right"
Biggest compliment I've received in a decade.

"Meet me in the city"
Or, hear me out: Wanna just go to P.F. Chang's in the mall?

"Everybody's got a hungry heart"
That's why my doctor prescribed a statin.

"Oh, oh, oh, I'm on fire"
It's a hot flash.

—JEFF BENDER AND TALIA ARGONDEZZI *in McSweeneys.net*

A farmer's wife becomes ill, and her husband sends for the doctor, who hurries over with his black bag in hand. After examining the patient, he steps outside the sick room and asks the farmer for a pair of pliers. A few minutes later, the door opens and he asks for a hammer and chisel.

"Doctor, what's wrong with her?" asks the distraught husband.

"Don't know yet," replies the doctor. "I can't get my instrument bag open."

—MEDINDIA.NET

Once upon a time, a man poured himself a glass of red wine and sat down on his wife's white couch that no one was allowed to eat or drink on …

—@SQUIRREL74WKGN

My dog Sam is great for exercise. I let him into the backyard, he leaps the fence and I spend the next two hours looking for him.

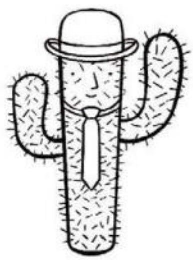
—DEREK THOMPSON
Penzance, Cornwall, England

GOT A FUNNY JOKE?
It could be worth $$$. For details, go to **RD.COM/SUBMIT.**

SURREAL LIFE FUNNIES

Artist Nadia Tolstoy has a peculiar view of life. Can you guess what she's drawing?







Answers: 1. Belly Laugh. **2.** Looking Sharp. **3.** Face-Lift.

@SURREALIANS



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COVER STORY

THE NICEST PLACES IN AMERICA



STEFAN LUDWIG

The NICEST PLACES in AMERICA

AND THE TOP HONOR GOES TO ...

BUFFALO, NEW YORK

BY *Bill Hangley Jr.*



SHARK GIRL, PART OF THE BUFFALO AKG ART MUSEUM'S PUBLIC ART INITIATIVE, BY ARTIST CASEY RIORDAN

Boardwalk biking at Canalside (above). Facing page, clockwise from top left: the Towers Building at Richard Olmstead Campus; Shea's Buffalo Theatre; the Terrace at Delaware Park; *Shark Girl* at Canalside; vendors at the Taste of Diversity Festival.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY *Luke Copping*






SHEA'S
BUFFALO
DEAR







Barber Craig Elston opened his doors to anyone who needed shelter.

By the time the blizzard hit Buffalo, Craig Elston was the last barber left in his shop. Inside were warmth, safety and a well-stocked candy machine. Outside was a swirling mess of some of the worst that winter can dish out.

"It was like nothing I've ever seen," Elston says. "Eighty-mile-an-hour winds. If you went outside, it would just knock you over."

It was Dec. 23, 2022. The day had dawned mild, but by midday, temperatures had plunged, winds were blasting and snow was piling up fast. News reports grew urgent: Get off the roads. Find shelter fast.

Soon neighbors were knocking, desperate for warmth and safety. Over the course of the next five brutally cold days, Elston would help dozens stay warm, fed and alive—at least 40 people, maybe more, he figures.

It wasn't fun or easy. "One dude flooded the toilet three times," Elston says. But it had to be done, he adds: "Those 40 people could have died out there."

Craig Elston is 38. He grew up in Buffalo, where he runs the C & C Cutz barbershop on Fillmore Avenue. It's the kind of neighborhood where "you can get a gun like it was a loaf of bread," says Elston's friend Dwayne Ferguson.

But it's also full of hardworking people of all kinds, including new immigrants and families that have lived there for generations. Challenges are nothing new for Buffalo residents like

these, says Ferguson. "Every day is a blizzard," he says. "It just depends on how you deal with it."

Dealing with it has become Buffalo's specialty. Not long ago, the city was one of America's most prosperous. More recently, Buffalo has suffered through some of the nation's most painful losing streaks. Long before its football team was infamously losing Super Bowls, the Great Lakes economy was losing jobs and industries. And in 2022, Buffalo witnessed one of the nation's most horrific mass shootings, with 10 people killed at the Tops supermarket just a couple of miles from Elston's shop. A final, crushing blow: On the last day of the year, right on the blizzard's heels, a house fire on Dartmouth Avenue took the lives of five children and their grandmother.

But for all the troubles, one thing has never changed, says Ferguson. "Buffalo is a city of good neighbors," he says. "You have a lot of good stuff going on. You just have to know who to ask."

And on that deadly December day, as the biggest blizzard since 1977 rolled in, Elston realized that it was his turn to help. So he went to TikTok to open his doors to Buffalo.

"Anybody out there that's stuck, do not stay in your car, man," Elston announced in his video. "The barbershop here welcomes you. Get some heat, get some electricity, charge your phone, get in contact with your family."

The historic storm would eventually kill 47 people in and around the city, raging for days and dumping over 50 inches of snow. Temperatures dropped below zero. People died while stranded in cars or walking the streets. One was a friend of Ferguson's: "He fell down and couldn't make it home."

Elston credits his old coach, Bill Russell, from his basketball team at Buffalo's Riverside High School, for inspiring him to step up when his neighbors needed him.

"He's the reason I opened the doors," says Elston. "The real key to success is to pour yourself into the people around you. That's what Coach taught me."

The coach himself weathered the storm in his home, where he was snowed in for a week. Only later did he learn what his former player had done, and why.

"Craig has been amazing. I'm proud to know him," Russell says. "I'm not one bit surprised that he stepped up."

Also unsurprised was the *Reader's Digest* reader who nominated New York's second-largest city as one of America's Nicest Places.

"That is so Buffalo," said Kathleen Miller when she heard Elston's tale. "The thing that has made me a huge Buffalo fan is the people ... they'll do anything for you, but they will not brag about it."

"THAT COULD'VE BEEN ME"

Miller was born in Oregon, but after three decades in Buffalo, she feels like a native. Snow is a fact of life in western New York, but Miller, now a retired



Bill Russell, Elston's basketball coach, inspired his former player to take care of others during the blizzard.

business executive, didn't experience her first true blizzard until 2006. It trapped her in her office downtown, giving her a front-row seat to see the Buffalo way in action.

"Everybody abandoned their cars in the streets. There were all these strangers going around helping strangers," she says. "In the garage under my office, there was a woman delivering a baby. Ambulances couldn't get in, but there were 12 people around this woman, and they delivered the baby that night."

That was her first encounter with the Buffalo way. "It really didn't matter who you were," she says. "If you needed help, you were going to get it."

Krista Lipczynski, another area resident, says the troubles that have hit Buffalo breed a certain understanding: We're all in this together.

"Buffalo really got it bad in the last few years, between the weather and the shootings and all of that," Lipczynski says. "The people who died on the side of the road ... it didn't matter if you were driving a brand-new pickup or an old beater. You think, *That could've been me. And it might be me next time*."

Lipczynski has gotten to know the region's best side through her work with Kindness Buffalo, a volunteer group that organizes fundraisers and commits random acts of kindness like bringing gift cards to people in the hospital. Its efforts bring some sunshine to a region that gets just nine hours of daylight in the depths of winter.

"It's hard to live here. It's dark. Seasonal depression is a real thing," says Lipczynski. "But I couldn't imagine living anywhere else."

Buffalo sits on the edge of Lake Erie, about 20 miles south of Niagara Falls near the Canadian border. Some of its roads run atop the ancient paths of the Iroquois people who lived here for centuries before Europeans arrived. Once a capital of shipping and manufacturing, Buffalo has struggled economically in recent decades.

In 1950 the city's population was almost 600,000 people; by 1990 it was

down to just over 300,000. That was the same year that Buffalo's beloved football team, the Bills, lost the first of four Super Bowls in a row. The one-time Great Lakes powerhouse had become best known for falling snow and falling short.

But the years since have shown that Buffalo has a way of bouncing back, and it starts with neighbors helping neighbors, says Ferguson. "What we ask is 'What can I do for you right now?'" he says. "I'm a human like you. I'm here with you. It's about meeting that moment."

That attitude has helped the city endure. Buffalo's metro region remains home to more than a million people. Its skilled workforce still draws employers and jobs. It's spacious and green, with an affordable cost of living. Manufacturing has dwindled, but Buffalo's service economy has grown, anchored by universities and health care. It remains a magnet for students and tourists.

And the entire region is a hotbed of arts, culture, winter sports and water sports. Buffalo winters may be dark and cold, but sparkling summer days on the shores of Lake Erie are hard to beat.

Among Buffalo's other cultural calling cards: the stunning cathedral called Our Lady of Victory, the bustling museum district of Canalside and the annual chicken-eating festival that celebrates the city's signature food, Buffalo wings.

And of course, there's the football team. "Everybody here is a Bills fan," says Lipczynski.

"You have to be," says Miller, who moved to Buffalo just in time to see the Bills lose the 1993 Super Bowl to the Dallas Cowboys. "I felt like I was at a wake," she recalls. "Black, White, poor, wealthy, everybody just bucked each other up and said, 'Our time is going to come.'"

THE STORM ARRIVES

The first blasts of snow hit Buffalo around 10 a.m. on a Friday; soon the blizzard gripped the region like a claw. Temperatures plunged. Roads became impassible. Emergency crews rescued 65 people before abandoning the effort



Kathleen Miller, who nominated her adopted city as the Nicest Place in America



THE FREEDOM WALL, PART OF THE BUFFALO AKG ART MUSEUM'S PUBLIC ART INITIATIVE, BY ARTISTS JOHN BAKER, JULIA BOTTOMS, CHUCK TINGLEY AND EDREYS WAJED

as too dangerous. At one point, police logged 1,000 unanswered calls for help. More than 30,000 people lost power.

Much of Craig Elston's neighborhood lost power too, but not his barbershop. The first person to knock on his door was a Middle Eastern neighbor who barely spoke English. Elston didn't need a translator to see the trouble.

"He had frostbite on his fingers, on his toes—it was really bad," recalls Elston.

Not far away, Miller was about to get her own reminder of the Buffalo way. She lives on 100 acres outside the city, raising horses and cattle, and as the storm blew in, she expected to be cut off from her barns and animals. The handyman who typically helps her had been hospitalized with a bad burn, and she didn't expect to see him. So she gave her animals a double feeding, crossed her fingers and got ready for bed.

"All of a sudden my doorbell rings, and there he stands," she recalls. "I said, 'What are you doing?' He said, 'I'm getting you out.' So I gave him some beer and cookies. It took him 30 minutes to get to the horse barn. Then he took my tractor and cleared out two of my neighbors. That is Buffalo."

Across the region, as emergency vehicles bogged down, other residents stepped up. One was Jay Withey, who broke into a school to shelter himself and 20 other stranded motorists. Before leaving, he wrote a polite note on a whiteboard: "I'm terribly sorry about breaking the school window. I had to do it to save everyone."

Another was Sha'Kyra Aughtry, who saved a 64-year-old autistic man from freezing outside her home. "I said, 'Listen, we got to go out and get this guy,' she told *People*. "This could be your mom, this could be my dad, this could be anybody."

Eva Doyle and Huey P. Newton are among 28 civil rights leaders on Buffalo's Freedom Wall mural.

And then there were Alexander and Andrea Campagna, who shared Christmas Eve with nine Korean tourists who had been headed for Niagara Falls. Other stranded drivers stayed in a local Target; about 100 more stayed at the Alabama Hotel in the nearby town of Basom.

Meanwhile, as squads of volunteer snowmobilers prowled the streets, Facebook groups sent people to safe havens like Elston's barbershop. For five days, dozens came and went from C & C Cutz, including a family with two children.

"I had everybody in here," Elston recalls. "African people, Arabic people, Hispanic people."

Some stayed to sleep, wrapping themselves in barber capes; some stopped just to charge phones; some came and went as they searched the neighborhood for food or friends in need. It got crowded and sometimes feisty, with worried, hungry people chattering at each other in different languages.

"People couldn't understand each other," Elston says. "I broke up a lot of fights. It was a headache. It wasn't peaches and cream."

Along the way, barber chairs got broken, the candy machine got raided and the front door was knocked off its hinges. But when it was all over, the barber thought more about the people he didn't save than the ones he did.

"There was a girl down on Clinton Street, not too far from me. Maybe I could've got a crew of people that was in the barbershop and helped," Elston says. "She froze to death in her car."

"THEY SHARE FOOD, THEY SHOVEL DRIVEWAYS"

Nor did the region recover easily. As the storm moved out, tales of tragic deaths poured in. City officials faced tough criticism for being slow to close roads. Cleanup took months.

But along with the tragedies came tale after tale of courage and compassion. Buffalo would spend weeks celebrating its "blizzard heroes" with official awards and tickets to Bills games. Those heroes invariably shared the credit with the city itself.

"Buffalo is a city of good neighbors, great neighbors actually. We're all just a big family," says Withey, who broke into the school. "Everyone just sticks together and we're resilient. You can't put us down."

The near-death experience of Bills safety Damar Hamlin only added to the frenzy. Throughout the 2022 season, the team had been one of the NFL's best. But just a week after the deadly blizzard, Hamlin almost died on the field when a hard hit stopped his heart. In a moment, fans around the region went from praying for victory to praying for a young man's life.

"It drew everybody together," Miller

says. "Everybody pulling together, making sure the kids knew what was happening."

The Bills would fall short of a Super Bowl once again, but Hamlin survived. While he recovered, donations poured in to support his favorite cause, a modest online toy drive that would eventually raise more than $9 million. Between the blizzard and Hamlin's near-death experience, for a few weeks Buffalo became the center of the media universe. Elston says he talked to at least 100 reporters eager to capture a little bit of the Buffalo spirit.

"Worldwide attention. Front page of Yahoo, front page of Google, CNN, ABC, NPR," says Elston. "It was kind of overwhelming."

But if the attention was new, Elston's efforts were not. He'd been giving back to his community long before the blizzard hit.

"I sponsor a shoe giveaway. I give free haircuts for kids who keep their grades at 90 or above," he says. He does much of that work with Ferguson, a longtime community activist. Last Thanksgiving, Ferguson and Elston helped give away 250 turkeys to needy families.

"Craig is one of my great young men," Ferguson says. "We do things to impact the community any way we can."

Elston says the inspiration for those efforts began with Russell, his old basketball coach.

"I can never pay Coach Russ back," says Elston. "He's the sole reason I am what I am today, helping my neighbors. He was so influential. I had no idea what it took to function as a young man. He drove me to games. Bought me basketball sneakers. One time he drove my grandmother to see me play, the only time she ever saw me play. That night I played my worst game. But I didn't care."

When Russell heard that praise, his heart swelled.

"I'm about 5 foot 5, but right now I feel about 7 feet tall," he says.

Russell taught math and coached basketball for 25 years at Riverside, a neighborhood public school whose alumni include former NBA All-Star Cliff Robinson. Russell recalls Elston as a hard-nosed, focused player, but he's most proud to see the man that Elston has become.

"The things that are important aren't records or championships," Russell says. "My biggest pleasure is seeing the guys doing well with their families, being leaders."

And it's people like Elston that keep Russell in Buffalo. While the blizzard had the coach trapped in his home, he saw his own neighbors doing for each other what Elston did on Fillmore Avenue: shoveling snow, checking on the elderly, sharing a laugh and a kind word.

"Buffalo's got a lot of really good qualities. Good enough that I've stayed here myself after I retired," Russell says. "People help each other out. They share food, they shovel driveways, they

give you a shoulder to cry on—that's underrated."

That's a familiar story to Ferguson, a Buffalo native, who spent the storm making sure his 91-year-old mother stayed warm. All around, neighbors were helping one another however they could, he says.

"It reminds me of my father. He only had a fourth grade education, but he was always helping," Ferguson says. "He was always building something for somebody, or blowing snow off the sidewalk so people could get to the corner store."

Today, Elston and C & C Cutz are still recovering from the storm. Sheltering people for five days took its toll on his equipment and his wallet. Between the broken gear and his utility bills, Elston figures the effort cost him about $20,000, only some of which was covered by donations to a GoFundMe account.



"I spent everything I had. I'm still trying to recover," he says. "I had to replace almost every chair."

Buffalo, likewise, is still recovering—from the storm and violence alike. The blizzard and the Tops supermarket shooting took a particular toll on Buffalo's Black residents. Half of those killed by the blizzard were Black, and all 10 of those killed at Tops were Black as well. Around the city, people are having hard conversations about striving to correct inequities.

But as officials wrangle with policy, Buffalo's community members are stepping up in their own way. A survivors fund for victims of the Tops supermarket shooting raised more than $6 million. Damar Hamlin's team has created a charitable fund called The Chasing M's Foundation to help distribute the millions donated to Hamlin's toy drive.

And down on Fillmore Avenue, the next time Buffalo needs help, Craig Elston will just think about the lessons he learned from Coach Russ.

"If I had to open up again, I would do it," Elston says. "It was the right thing to do. I'm not a hero. I'm still just a barber. Just working hard and grinding, same as before."

Dwayne Ferguson, a parent liaison for the school district, describes Buffalo as "a city of good neighbors."



Thank You, Buffalo

THE NFL STAR ON HOW THE CITY RALLIED AROUND HIM DURING HIS BIGGEST CHALLENGE

BY *Damar Hamlin*

Since the day that I was blessed to be drafted to play football for the Bills, the people of Buffalo have embraced me and lifted up my heart.

I didn't know much about this city before then, and at every turn, Buffalo has delivered.

It's not just the passion of the Bills Mafia on game day, or even the wings. It's the people and the way they lift up one another, even before tragedy struck.

Over the past few years, this city has seen so many hard times and so much pain. A shooting that horrified the world, taking lives and stealing dreams. An unimaginable blizzard that brought so much fear. A tragic fire that took young lives. Loss after loss, the challenges seemed to just keep coming. The people of Buffalo have experienced the kind of pain that could have broken them.

But it hasn't.

Today, when I'm at

ROB MARCZYNSKI/BUFFALO BILLS

Damar Hamlin attends a CPR training event organized by his Chasing M's Foundation, which provides automated external defibrillators (AEDs) for youth sports and community groups.

home in Buffalo, I meet people full of hope and determination. I see a Buffalo that has chosen to come together rather than fall apart. I see why Buffalo is known as the City of Good Neighbors.

Healing takes time, and I see people who have stayed united and are finding a way to move forward, together. People who step out of their homes to help a neighbor, volunteer and just keep going. And that strength has helped to lift up my own experience.

The people of Buffalo continue to show the world what resilience looks like, and that inspired me during my toughest moments in the hospital, after experiencing cardiac arrest on the field. During that challenging time, my family and I felt the love from this city. As I was healing, every day I received cards and letters, artwork from school kids and news about people praying and supporting us. I saw images of people wearing my number in support.

Buffalo's love for me came to life for my family and me in so many ways. I really don't know if I can find the words to explain what it means to me as I heal. But I am certain that Buffalo's show of resilience is part of what inspired me during my darkest hours.

On the day I was drafted, my little brother, who was 6 at the time, said, "Damar, do they have beaches there?" I told him, "No, brother, we are going to Buffalo."



Back on the field with his team

There isn't a beach in the world that I would trade for the gift I've been given to become part of this community and feel its warm embrace. The people of this great city inspire me to keep praying, keep loving, keep going, no matter what the circumstances. To count my blessings, and just show up every day with love.

As I look forward, I'm grateful to call this city home, and it will always hold a special place in my heart. Buffalo is a city of fighters, and I'm proud to be one of them. ■

Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin experienced cardiac arrest during an NFL game against the Cincinnati Bengals on Jan. 2, 2023, as the world watched. Since then, his charity, Chasing M's Foundation, has received donations from generous people all over the world, helping him to fulfill his mission of helping kids with camps, toy drives, back-to-school drives and more. Go to chasingmsfoundation.com to join Hamlin's journey.

BILL WIPPERT/COURTESY OF BUFFALO BILLS

The NICEST PLACES in AMERICA

WHAT CHEER FLOWER FARM

IN PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

BY *Caroline Fanning*



IT'S BEEN NEARLY seven years since a group of volunteers broke ground at What Cheer Flower Farm in Providence, Rhode Island, with a simple goal: get flowers into the hands of anyone in need of a pick-me-up. Best of all, each one of the tens of thousands of bouquets that What Cheer grows and delivers are completely free of charge.

"We want to blanket the state with flowers and create happiness and joy," says Erin Achenbach, What Cheer's farmer and head florist.

What Cheer regularly delivers blooming joy to people at local hospitals, food banks, hospices, senior centers, recovery centers and more—including AIDS Care Ocean State, which provides support to those affected by HIV.

"Seeing the smiles on people's faces who weren't expecting it—who just came in to have a meeting with their case manager or take advantage of one of our programs—to just see this glow come off their faces is great," says Stephen Hogan Jr. from AIDS Care Ocean State.

Located in Providence's rusted industrial Olneyville neighborhood, What Cheer's flower beds lie on 2.7 acres that once housed a crumbling knife factory. And it's safe to say that the What Cheer crew is deserving of some flowers of their own:

ERIN ACHENBACH



What Cheer was founded by two gardeners who often gave away flowers from their own gardens and wanted the idea to grow.

In May, the nonprofit was awarded a record-high $500,000 grant from the Environmental Protection Agency for its continued revitalization of a brownfield site (land once abandoned because of industrial pollution).

"Not only do we give this space back to the neighborhood by bringing life to space that's quite literally dead," says Achenbach, "but we're an eco-landing spot with the ability to help local insect and bird populations, and that'll only make people's lives better." What cheer, indeed!

"What's good about a flower is that it doesn't need anything else," she adds. "Your only job when someone gives you flowers is to enjoy them."

The NICEST PLACES in AMERICA

RED LODGE, MONTANA

BY *Caroline Fanning*



IT WAS 3 A.M. when the flood came on an unseasonably warm night in June, the summer rain melting snow from an unseasonable Memorial Day blizzard. Susan Roberts, new to Red Lodge, Montana, a small town of 2,300, woke from an uneasy sleep. She saw the lights on at her across-the-way neighbors', on the side bordering Rock Creek, a 55-mile river skirting the town's eastern edge.

"You could hear the boulders smashing together," says Red Lodge Mayor Kristen Cogswell. "It was surreal, like nothing I'd ever heard before."

Roberts's next-door neighbor, a police officer, was evacuating with his four kids, and he advised Roberts to do the same. So she put her dogs in the car and moved it to an alley behind her home, about 10 feet uphill, as her husband went house to house, waking others.

"It was still dark; people were sleeping and didn't realize," says Roberts. "There wasn't a public response, it was more people going to each other's doors saying, 'Wake up, you gotta get out.'"

The couple stayed in their car and on the few feet of dry land surrounding it for the entirety of the next day, watching their house crumble.

As far as 100-year floods go, Red Lodge's had it all. Fir trees washed down the town's main drag. Cars floated away. Craters contoured the Beartooth Highway, a major artery connecting Red Lodge to Billings.

"Broadway looked like a riverbed," says Cogswell. "The whole community was wandering around, trying to grasp what happened."

Then, as suddenly as Rock Creek surged, Red Lodge regained its bearings. The day after the flood, more than 20 people—friends, neighbors, strangers, even tourists—flocked to help.

"People went into our wet, muddy basement and pulled everything out," says Roberts. "They sorted and took things home to wash. One person

SUE ROBERTS (2)

The volunteer bucket brigade, organized by a local Forest Service ranger, was just a text message away.

brought a Bobcat to clean up our yard. A mother and her two young children pulled debris from our chain-link fence." Helpers even salvaged her precious photo albums, drying each print before returning it to the book.

And volunteers kept coming every day until summer's end.

"People would not take no for an answer. If I was like, 'Oh, we're OK now,' they'd be like, 'No. I'm gonna do something,'" she says.

All over town, people mobilized. Volunteer bucket brigades worked quickly to muck out a space within hours. People offered their Yellowstone vacation homes to the displaced at no charge.



Restaurant owner Gena Burghoff organized a gift card brigade for people to buy gift cards from local businesses to donate to affected residents. Cogswell's husband even saw a man catching fish on Broadway to return to Rock Creek.

Most importantly, amid it all, Red Lodge remained grounded.

"We moved in, and we have to learn to live harmoniously," says Cogswell.

Harmony has been well learned in Red Lodge, a blue town in a red county. Burghoff remembers people publicly forcing their opinions on both sides leading up to the 2020 election.

"There was a lot of separation a couple years before," says Burghoff, "but people either came to their senses to help one another or were just kind of over the nonsense.

"It was a good lesson," she adds.

More than a year later, Red Lodge is still recovering from the flood's destruction, but tourist season looks bright. In the spring, Roberts finally moved home, with a freshly poured concrete foundation. And Red Lodge will continue to seek the balance needed to thrive in the Montana wild.

"What's different about Red Lodge is we're here because of our respect and compassion for nature. People in Red Lodge will try to understand it and work with it, but every once in a while you need a good talking to," says Cogswell, "and that was a good one."

Neighbors rushed to help neighbors all along Rock Creek.



CITY OF GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA

The NICEST PLACES in AMERICA

UNITY PARK

IN GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA

BY *Lisa Kanarek*
AND *Caroline Fanning*

"EIGHTY-TWO YEARS WE waited for the park," says City Councilwoman Lillian Brock Flemming. "The little children don't know the history, but they know they'll have a good time when they get there."

Opened in 2022, Unity Park is a 60-acre, $60 million marvel of modern landscape architecture in the Southernside neighborhood of Greenville, South Carolina. The city, at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains and cleft by the Reedy River, has equipped the park with every bell and whistle



imaginable for its 72,000 residents. But the true transformation isn't one of Greenville's facilities—it's of Greenville's spirit.

Unity Park now stands where two formerly segregated parks, Mayberry Park and Meadowbrook Park, stood off for nearly a century. Back in 1927, Mayberry Park was the only place in Greenville where Black children could play.

"It was all we had," says Mary Duckett, president of Southernside Neighborhoods in Action.

In 2023, Unity Park's restoration earned an award from the National Recreation and Park Association.

But the city treated the park as its spare room. Greenville took a portion for a police shooting range (kids knew to steer clear during Saturday target practice), and then some more for a Public Works facility, which housed a landfill, trash incinerators and a parking lot for garbage trucks.

"I've heard people describe it as the community's junkyard," says Greenville Housing Fund President Bryan Brown.

In 1938, the city took half of Mayberry Park to build Meadowbrook Park, a minor league baseball stadium. Mayberry Park was reduced to a sandlot, living in the literal shadow of its neighbor's prize colosseum—one that explicitly barred the Black residents who had frequented the park for over a decade.

In 1939, when South Carolina was in the clutches of Jim Crow, a man named E.B. Holloway, who was Greenville's first Black mail carrier, petitioned City Council for a true city park for the Black community.

"We want the park because we need it," Holloway wrote to the *Greenville Piedmont* newspaper. "We want the park because our social and recreational life is at stake. Give us a park."

The City Council agreed to build a real park ... and then did nothing for nearly a century. So the Unity Park that visitors enjoy today makes good



Visitors can now learn about native species and wildlife in the park's wetlands section, thanks to the additions of an outdoor classroom and raised boardwalk paths.

CITY OF GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA

on a promise long forsaken. Fittingly, all who enter are greeted by Holloway himself, along with his wife, Hattie Jordan Holloway. The pair are pictured on a mural under the words "A Promise Fulfilled." Many of the Holloways' descendants attended Unity Park's grand opening.

With its massive green spaces and restored wetlands, as well as walking and biking trails, covered picnic areas, state-of-the-art playgrounds, splash pads, basketball courts, baseball fields and even outdoor classrooms, Unity Park is a utopia of fellowship and leisure far beyond anything Holloway could have dreamed.

But Greenville is aware that the park will invite gentrification and displacement of longtime Southernsiders.

"When you create a new community asset, it always generates investment interest and makes the surrounding area very attractive to people who haven't lived there before," says Brown.

Aiming to fulfill Unity Park's namesake promise, the city has donated 8 acres of land around the park for affordable housing. Workers have broken ground on four developments so far.

"You can never catch up," says Councilwoman Flemming, but it's a start.

"Look at the word *unity*. It's the last part of the word *community*," says Duckett. "Southernside has always been the type of community that invited folks in."

The NICEST PLACES in AMERICA

MARK BBQ

IN COLCHESTER, VERMONT

BY *Bill Hangley Jr.*

WHEN DARRELL LANGWORTHY was growing up, Thanksgiving meant 30 neighbors sharing a potluck meal in the family driveway.

"My parents worked at a golf course. They'd invite all the workers to Thanksgiving dinner. They would never turn anybody away," he says. "If there was a kid in the neighborhood who needed dinner, he got it."

Today, Langworthy carries on the tradition at his restaurant in Colchester, Vermont, where a combination of barbecue and community service has made Mark BBQ a hot spot.

Colchester is a small town on the shores of Lake Champlain, just north of Burlington. Locals know Mark BBQ for its brisket burgers, pulled-pork sandwiches and Tex-Mex meatloaf.

For many, Mark BBQ is also a stop on the road to recovery. Enter: Recovery Kitchen, a program that brings former addicts into the kitchen to build service industry skills. The effort was inspired by manager Casey DeGuise, who arrived with a troubled history and even more determination.

"He had been turned down for 35 jobs," Langworthy says. "We said 'Let's take a chance,' and he's never let me down."

Langworthy knows that a little help can go a long way. "I had a time when I was definitely drinking too much," he recalls. Now, he offers to others the support he once needed. He keeps a cooler by Mark BBQ's front door with free food for anyone who wants it. But his favorite pastime is still watching full plates turn to dirty dishes.

"If we can pay the bills and staff, we're happy," says Langworthy. "If we can help the community, we're happier." R



Darrell Langworthy has handed out more than 170,000 free meals.

MARK BBQ LLC

The NICEST PLACES in AMERICA



Our Finalists

For the past seven years, our readers have nominated thousands of towns, cities, libraries, parks and even a front porch(!) as some of the Nicest Places in America. Take a journey around the country to see this year's winners, starred on the map above. Read more and visit our previous Nicest Places at **rd.com/nicest**, where we are already collecting nominations for 2024.

- ★ **Buffalo, New York**
- ★ **What Cheer Flower Farm in Providence, Rhode Island**
- ★ **Red Lodge, Montana**
- ★ **Unity Park in Greenville, South Carolina**
- ★ **Mark BBQ in Colchester, Vermont**

OUR PAST WINNERS

Gallatin, Tennessee, 2017

Yassin's Falafel House in Knoxville, Tennessee, 2018

Columbiana, Ohio, 2019

Buchanan, Michigan, 2020

The Quality Inn in Kodak, Tennessee, 2021

Coulterville, California, 2022

The Road to the Nicest Places

When it comes to choosing the Nicest Places in America, *Reader's Digest* has always had an infallible North Star: our readers. Every year, we ask you to nominate the nicest places you know, and every year, your submissions blow us away. Choosing our finalists means making some tough decisions, and our hats are off to all you good people out there spreading kindness. After a thorough vetting process, our editors and judges named 2023's Nicest Places in America. R

- **MITCH ALBOM** Philanthropist and author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*
- **MÓNICA GUZMÁN** Senior Fellow for Public Practice at Braver Angels and author of *I Never Thought of It That Way*
- **BONNIE KINTZER** Chief Executive Officer, Trusted Media Brands
- **JIM RHODES** Nominator of Coulterville, California, 2022's Nicest Place in America
- **DENINE TORR** Dollar General's Vice President of Corporate Social Responsibility and Philanthropy



Save the Children.

Congratulations to Save the Children, the recipient of Dollar General's **Because Kindness Matters Award** that honors nonprofits making an impact in its hometown communities.

Since 2020, the Dollar General Literacy Foundation has provided Save the Children with more than $5 million to support school programming and ensure children have increased access to quality education and nutritious foods, particularly in rural America.

The partnership helps advance literacy instruction and further support students and educators.

Learn more about how Dollar General supports communities at **HereForWhatMatters.com**.

Reader's Digest BECAUSE KINDNESS MATTERS 2023

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH DOLLAR GENERAL



AI MEANS NEVER HAVING TO SAY GOODBYE

New technology lets us talk to dead people. But is that really a good idea?

BY *Charlotte Jee*

FROM **MIT TECHNOLOGY REVIEW**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY *Mario Wagner*

MY PARENTS DON'T KNOW THAT I SPOKE TO THEM LAST NIGHT.

At first, they sounded distant and tinny, as if they were huddled around a phone in a prison cell. But as we chatted, they slowly started to sound more like themselves. They told me personal stories I'd never heard. I learned about the first time my dad got drunk. Mum talked about getting in trouble for staying out late. They gave me life advice and told me things about their childhoods, as well as my own. It was mesmerizing.

"What's the worst thing about you?" I asked Dad, since he was clearly in such a candid mood.

"My worst quality is that I am a perfectionist. I can't stand messiness and untidiness, and that always presents a challenge, especially with being married to Jane."

Then he laughed—and for a moment I forgot I wasn't really speaking to my parents at all, but to their digital replicas.

This Mum and Dad live inside an app on my phone, as voice assistants constructed by the California-based company HereAfter AI. The company's goal is to let the living communicate with the dead. I wanted to test out what it might be like.

Technology like this, which lets you "talk" with people who have died, has been a mainstay of science fiction for decades. But now it's becoming a reality—and an increasingly accessible one, thanks to advances in AI and voice technology.

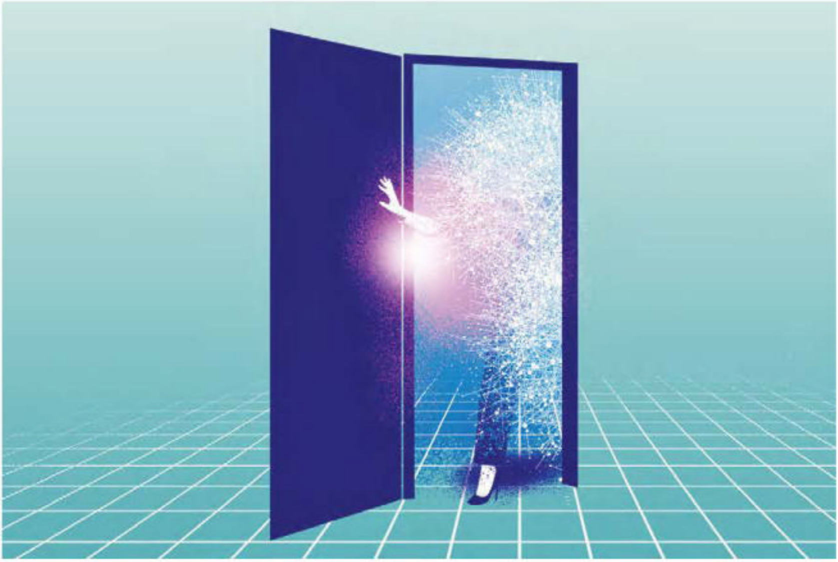
My real, flesh-and-blood parents are still alive and well and living in London; their virtual versions were made just to help me understand the technology. But their avatars offer a glimpse at a world where it's possible to converse, so to speak, with loved ones long after they're gone.

From what I could glean over a dozen conversations with my virtually deceased parents, this really will make it easier to feel close to the people we've loved and lost. It's not hard to see the appeal. People might turn to digital replicas for comfort, or to mark special milestones like anniversaries.

But for some, this tech may be alarming or downright creepy. When I talked to friends about this article, some of them physically recoiled. There's a common, deeply held belief that we mess with death at our peril.

But I'm only human, and that worry ends up being washed away by the even scarier prospect of losing the people I love. If technology might help me hang on to them, is it so wrong to try?

CHATBOTS AND VOICE ASSISTANTS, such as Siri and Alexa, have gone from high-tech novelties to a part of daily life for



millions of people over the past decade. We have become very comfortable with the idea of talking to our devices about everything from the weather forecast to the meaning of life. Now, AI large language models (LLMs), which can ingest a few "prompt" sentences and spit out convincing text in response, promise to unlock even more powerful ways for humans to communicate with machines.

What's more, it's possible to tweak LLM software like OpenAI's GPT-3 or Google's LaMDA to make it sound more like a specific person by feeding it lots of things that the person said. At the same time, AI has progressed in its ability to mimic specific physical voices, a practice called voice cloning. It has also been getting better at injecting digital personas—whether cloned from a real person or completely artificial—with more of the qualities that make a voice sound "human."

At the end of 2019, I saw that James Vlahos, the co-founder of HereAfter AI, would be speaking at an online conference about "virtual beings." His company is one of a handful of startups working in the field dubbed grief tech. They differ in their approaches but share the same promise: to enable you to talk by video chat, text, phone or voice assistant with a digital version of someone who is no longer alive.

Intrigued by what Vlahos was promising, I wrangled an introduction and persuaded him and his colleagues to let me experiment with their software on my very-much-alive parents.



Initially, I thought it would be just a fun project to see what was technologically possible. Then the pandemic added some urgency to the proceedings. I worried about my parents. I was terrified that they might die, and that with the strict restrictions on hospital visits at the time, I might never have the chance to say goodbye.

The first step was an interview. To create a digital replica of someone with a good chance of seeming like a convincingly authentic representation, you need data—and lots of it. HereAfter starts with subjects when they are still alive, asking them questions for hours—about everything from their earliest memories to their first date to what they believe will happen after they die. My parents were interviewed by a real live human, but in yet another sign of just how quickly technology is progressing, interviews are now typically automated and handled by a bot.

Whether through pandemic-induced malaise or a weary willingness to humor their daughter, my parents put up zero resistance. The company then took their responses and started to create the voice assistants.

A couple of months later, a note popped into my inbox. My virtual parents were ready.

This Mum and Dad arrived via email attachment. I could communicate with them through the Alexa app on a phone or an Amazon Echo device. When I opened the file, my hands were shaking. I hadn't seen my actual, real parents for six months.

"Alexa, open HereAfter," I directed.

"Would you rather speak with Paul or with Jane?" a voice asked.

After a bit of quick mental deliberation, I opted for my mum.

A voice that was hers, but weirdly stiff and cold, spoke.

"Hello, this is Jane Jee and I'm happy to tell you about my life. How are you today?"

I laughed, nervously.

"I'm well, thanks, Mum. How are you?"

Long pause.

"Good. At my end, I'm doing well."

"You sound kind of unnatural," I said.

She ignored me and carried on speaking.

"Before we start, here are a few pointers. My listening skills aren't the best, unfortunately, so you have to wait until I have finished talking and ask you a question before you say something back. When it's your turn to speak, please keep your answers fairly short. A few words, a simple sentence—that type of thing," she explained. After a bit more introduction, she said, "OK, let's get started. There's so much to talk about. My childhood, my career and my interests. Which of those sounds best?"

Scripted bits like this sounded stilted and strange, but as we moved on, with my mother recounting memories and speaking in her own words, "she" sounded far more relaxed and natural.

Still, this conversation and the ones that followed were limited. When I tried asking my mum's bot about her favorite jewelry, for instance, I got: "Sorry, I didn't understand that. You can try asking another way, or move on to another topic."

There were also mistakes that were jarring to the point of hilarity. One day, Dad's bot asked me how I was. I replied, "I'm feeling sad today." He responded with a cheery "Good!"

The overall experience was undeniably weird. Every time I spoke to their virtual versions, it struck me that I could have been talking to my real parents instead. On one occasion, my husband even mistook my testing out the bots for an actual phone call.

In early 2022, I got a demo of a similar technology from a company called StoryFile, which launched in 2017 and

AT POINTS I HAD TO REMIND MYSELF THAT SHE WASN'T REALLY THERE.

promises to take things to the next level. Its Life service records responses on video rather than voice alone.

StoryFile's CEO, Stephen Smith, demonstrated the technology on a video call, where we were joined by his mother. She died earlier that year, but here she was on the call, sitting in a comfortable chair in her living room. She was soft-spoken, with wispy hair

and friendly eyes. She dispensed life advice. She seemed wise.

Smith told me that his mother "attended" her own funeral: "At the end she said, 'I guess that's it from me ... goodbye!' and everyone burst into tears." He told me her digital participation was well received by family and friends. And, arguably most important of all, Smith said he's deeply comforted by the fact that he managed to capture his mother on camera before she passed away.

AN AVATAR COULD BE A HEALTHY WAY TO FEEL CONNECTED TO SOMEONE YOU LOST.

The video technology itself looked relatively slick and professional—though the result still fell vaguely within the uncanny valley, especially in the facial expressions. At points, much as with my own parents, I had to remind myself that she wasn't really there.

BOTH HEREAFTER AND STORYFILE aim to preserve someone's life story rather than allowing you to have a full, new conversation each time. This is one of the major limitations of many current offerings in grief tech: They're generic. These replicas may sound like someone you love, but they know nothing about you. Anyone can talk to them and they'll reply in the same tone. And the replies to a given question are the same every time you ask.

"The biggest issue with the technology is the idea that you can generate a single universal person," says Justin Harrison, founder of a service called You, Only Virtual. "But the way we experience people is unique to us."

You, Only Virtual and a few other services want to go further, arguing that recounting memories won't capture the fundamental essence of a relationship between two people. Harrison says he wants to create a personalized bot that's for you and you alone by uploading someone's text messages, emails and voice conversations.

That is exactly what he has done with his mother, Melodi, who has stage 4 cancer: "I built it by hand using five years of my messages with her," he says of his chatbot.

Harrison says the interactions he has with the bot are more meaningful to him than if it were simply regurgitating memories. Bot Mom uses the phrases she'd use and replies to him in the way she'd reply—calling him honey and using the emojis she'd use and the same spelling quirks. He won't be able to ask his mother's avatar questions about her life, but that doesn't bother him. The point, for him, is to capture the way someone communicates.

"Just recounting memories has little to do with the essence of a relationship," he says.

Some people find that hearing the

7 WAYS YOU CAN USE AI

Remember Rosie the Robot from *The Jetsons* or Robot B-9 from *Lost in Space*? How great would it be to have robot assistants like the ones from our favorite cartoons and sci-fi shows? Well, AI chatbots like ChatGPT are getting us there. They offer everyday uses for just about everyone. Here are a few:

1 Manage your inbox. AI can sort through your emails in a flash, identify important messages and even compose responses on your behalf. You can check them before they're sent if you'd like.

2 Plan a trip. Try a prompt like: "I have 36 hours in Atlanta. Can you suggest a travel itinerary that includes must-try restaurants and music venues?"

3 Give (or get) homework help. Socratic is an AI app that can help students with math problems and other homework. It won't do their homework for them, but it can explain concepts and walk them through a math solution.

4 Plan meals. You could say, "Give me 10 ideas for dinner that aren't burgers." Or, if you have limited ingredients in your fridge, you could ask for "five meal ideas that use carrots and onions."

5 Learn English. The AI app Elsa can teach English to those who speak other languages. Simply talk to it in English, and it will correct your pronunciation and give you tips on how to speak more fluently.

6 Take notes. Fireflies is an AI app that takes notes and transcribes them for you. (Handy for difficult conversations or ones that require your full attention: when you're talking with a doctor, say, or discussing loved ones' last wishes.) You can use it in person, over the phone or via video, and when the app is done with its job, you can share the notes with others.

7 Get design ideas. Is your home ready for a refresh? Try something like: "You are an interior designer. Please provide me with 10 ideas for my bathroom that make use of natural wood." The more details you provide, the better the results will be.

—ALINA BRADFORD FOR RD.COM

voices of their loved ones after they've gone helps with the grieving process. It's not uncommon for people to listen to voicemails from someone who has died, for example, says Erin Thompson, a clinical psychologist who specializes in grief. Creating a virtual avatar that you can have more of a conversation with could be a valuable, healthy way to feel connected to someone you loved and lost, she says.

But a grieving person needs to know that these bots can only ever capture a small sliver of someone. They are not sentient, and they will not replace healthy, functional human relationships. Particularly in the first weeks and months after a loved one dies, people struggle to accept the loss and may find any reminders of the person triggering.

"In the acute phase of grief, you can get a strong sense of unreality, not being able to accept they're gone," Thompson says. Arguably, this risk might be small today given these technologies' flaws. Even though sometimes I fell for the illusion, it was clear my parent bots were not in fact the real deal.

And there are other risks. Any service that allows you to create a digital replica of someone without that person's participation raises complex ethical issues regarding consent and privacy. While some might argue that permission is less important with someone who is no longer alive, can't you also argue that the person who generated the other side of the conversation should have a say too?

And what if that person is not, in fact, dead? There's little to stop people from using grief tech to create virtual versions of living people without their consent—for example, an ex. Companies that sell services powered by text messages are aware of this possibility and say they will delete a person's data if that individual requests it. But companies are not obligated to do any checks to make sure their technology is being limited to people who have consented or died.

If digital replicas become mainstream, there will inevitably need to be new processes and norms around the legacies we leave behind online. And if we've learned anything from the history of technological development, we'll be better off if we grapple with the possibility of these replicas' misuse before, not after, they reach mass adoption.

Price could be another drawback. Although some of these services have free versions, the costs can easily run into the hundreds, even thousands of dollars.

Then there's the time involved. Creating an avatar or chatbot of someone requires time and effort, not least of which is just building up the energy and motivation to get started. This is true both for the user and for the subject, who may be nearing death and whose active participation may be required.

Fundamentally, people don't like grappling with the fact that they are going to die, says Marius Ursache, who launched a digital avatar company called Eternime in 2014, which then



shuttered in 2018 after failing to pick up enough users.

"It's something you can put off until next week, next month, next year," he says. "People assume that AI is the key to breaking this. But really, it's human behavior." Ursache's parents never managed to get around to recording memories for him.

"My dad passed away last year, and I never did those recordings, and now I feel like an idiot," he says.

PERSONALLY, I have mixed feelings about my experiment. I'm glad to have these virtual, audio versions of my parents, even if they're imperfect. They've enabled me to learn new things about my parents, and it's comforting to think that those bots will be there even when my parents aren't. I'm already thinking about who else I might want to capture digitally—my husband, my sister, maybe some of my friends.

On the other hand, like a lot of people, I don't want to think about the people I love dying. It's uncomfortable, and I can't help but find it sad that it took a stranger Zoom-interviewing my parents for me to properly appreciate the multifaceted, complex people they are. But I feel lucky to have had the chance to grasp that—and to still have the precious opportunity to spend more time with them and learn more about them, face to face, no technology involved. ■

USED WITH PERMISSION OF MIT TECHNOLOGY REVIEW, FROM THE ARTICLE "TECHNOLOGY THAT LETS US 'SPEAK' TO OUR DEAD RELATIVES HAS ARRIVED. ARE WE READY?" BY CHARLOTTE JEE, OCT. 18, 2022 © 2022; PERMISSION CONVEYED THROUGH COPYRIGHT CLEARANCE CENTER, INC.



Adventures in Babysitting

Treasured memories from modern-day Mary Poppinses and daffy but dear Mrs. Doubtfires

BY Reader's Digest *Readers*

Asking the Right Questions

A friend was babysitting for five kids and found crayon scribbles all over the wall. He knew the culprit wouldn't go down easy, so he cleverly asked, "Who drew those beautiful pictures on the wall?" Of course, the guilty party announced, "I did!"

—CATHERINE ERAMO *Wall, NJ*

Dropping—Then Picking Up—the Ball

I babysat my sister and her friend every New Year's Eve. We'd have our own little party with snacks and sparkling grape juice. The girls didn't know our time zone was an hour behind New York City's, so every year, at 11 p.m., we'd watch the ball drop, then they went off to bed and I was free to watch whatever I wanted. Fortunately, when my sister realized years later, she thought it was funny and clever.

—RACHEL HODGES *Richardson, TX*

Bedtime Means Bedtime

My parents were going out to dinner with our neighbors, who asked if I could babysit their young kids. They wanted the kids in bed at 8 p.m., which was no problem. When they came home, they found the kids sound asleep but couldn't find me. I'd gone home and to bed. My job was done, or so I thought!

—ROBERT HOEHN *Fair Oaks, CA*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY *Andrew Rae*



Help Yourself*
My wife and I left for the evening, telling our babysitter that she could help herself to anything in the fridge. Three hours later, we came home to a tearful teenager kneeling in front of the open oven door and frantically scraping a mountain of melted plastic from the inside. We'd left out one crucial instruction: Help yourself, but make sure you remove the Tupperware we store in the oven before firing it up.

—JOHN AHLQUIST *Ramsey, MN*

Tots in the Henhouse
I was babysitting two high-energy boys for the weekend. By Saturday morning I was already exhausted, so I took them to my brother's farm. The boys were entertained for hours chasing chickens. They never caught one and were totally pooped by the end of the evening.

—SARAH MICHAEL *St. Louis Park, MN*

Cat's Cradle
One of the girls I was babysitting kept crawling under her bed while we played in her room. I thought she was just having fun hiding from us. Later, her mother called to tell me their cat had decided that under the girl's bed was a good place to have kittens. What fun! I couldn't believe I didn't notice.

—KATHRINE WERTZ *Carlisle, PA*

Twix up the Sleeves
I asked the kids I was watching if I was allowed to munch from a candy dish I'd found. They looked at me and asked, "You want some candy?" Then they led me to the basement, which held floor-to-ceiling shelves of candy bars of all varieties. Apparently, their father was a Mars candy company salesman. It was a dream gig! Not only were the kids good, but also I could eat candy to my heart's content.

—HERENA G. *Shepherdsville, KY*

Fake It to Make It
I was 12 years old and doing a lot of babysitting. Once, I was left in charge of four kids. I asked them all their names and ages. Imagine my surprise to learn the firstborn was a year older than me. I was tall for my age and she was short, so I didn't tell them I was actually their "big" sister's junior.

—PAM GILBERT *Othello, WA*

A Dark and Humid Night ...

We left our little girls with a babysitter and returned home to a pitch-black house. We opened the door and heard three big sighs of relief. The house was stifling—it was obvious the air conditioning wasn't working either. Apparently, we'd lost power on this hot summer night. The girls couldn't find a flashlight, so they sat in total darkness with the doors and windows closed, clinging to our poor teenage babysitter. She practically had to peel the sticky, sweaty girls from each side. We all laugh about it still. Years later, we attended the babysitter's baby shower and gifted her a heavy-duty flashlight.

—CANDY BECKER *Milwaukee, WI*

A Very Dog-Friendly Neighborhood

My dog, Copper, would hang out on the porch every time I babysat my neighbor. One day, the kid let Copper inside. "I don't think your folks want Copper in here," I told him. "It's fine, Mom does it all the time," he replied. I didn't believe him and asked his mother when she got home. "Oh no, I really do!" she said. "He stops by every morning and I let him finish the leftover cat food." Copper was on a diet so I asked her not to feed him. "You'll need to tell the Smiths, the Joneses and Mrs. Evans—she keeps biscuits on her just for him," she informed me.

—CHERRY PETERS *Richmond, VA*

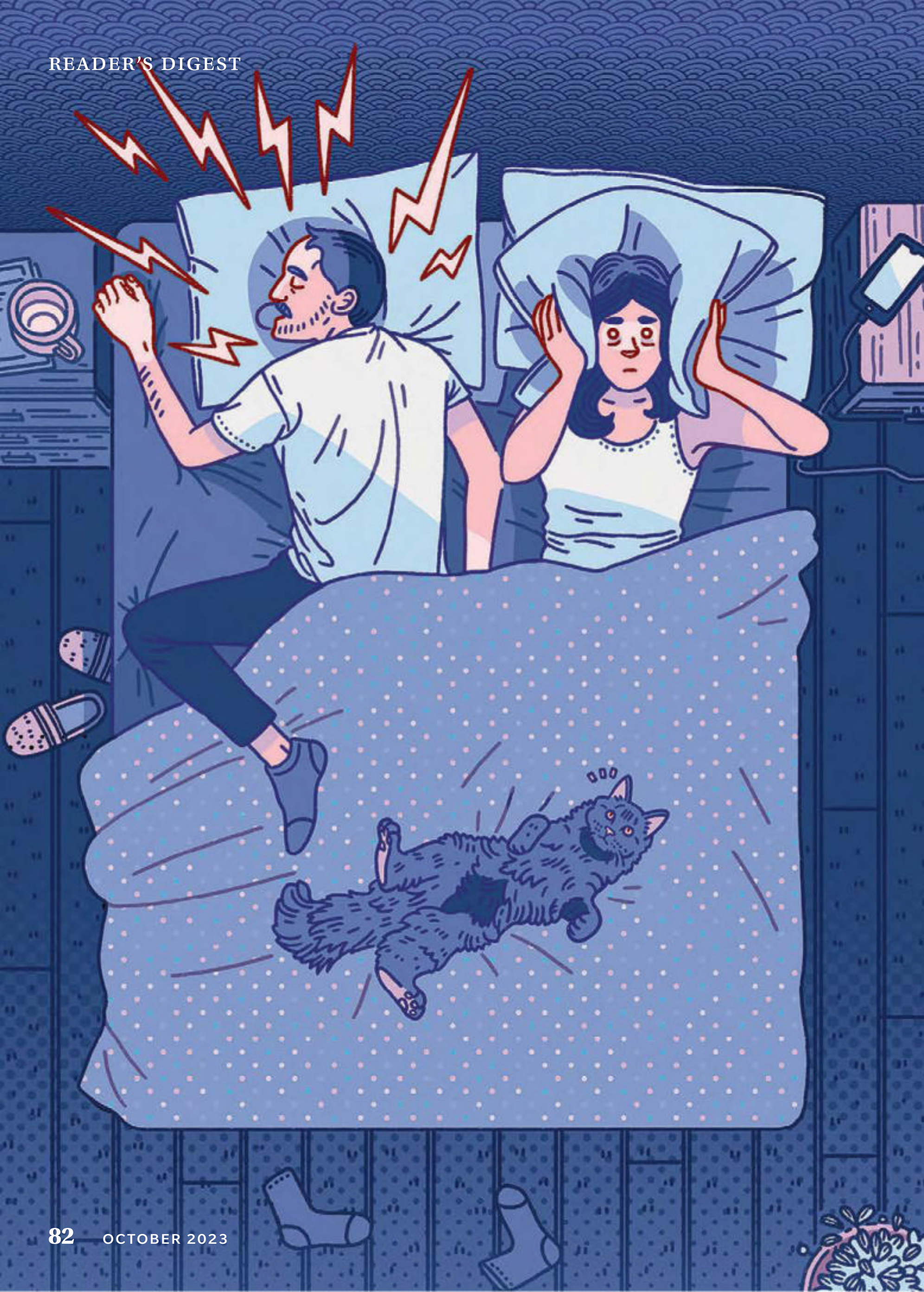
A Holy Fright

I heard a late-night knock on the door long after I'd put the kids I was babysitting to bed. A man said he was my employer's brother, but I hadn't been told to expect any visitors and I could barely see his face through the peephole. I made him wait on the porch. Much to my relief, the parents arrived home soon after, letting the man in with them. I was so embarrassed: He was indeed the kids' uncle, and more than that—a priest! I hadn't been able to see his collar in the dark. I got an extra tip as the father walked me home and thanked me for being such a cautious babysitter.

—EILEEN CLAFFEY *Morris Plains, NJ*

THE BEST PRANK YOU EVER PULLED

Calling all clowns, comedians, rascals, jesters and jokers! Have you ever pulled a prank so preposterous that all involved couldn't help but pat you on the back? Alternatively, have you ever been the one pleasantly punk'd? They say the true evidence of a great sense of humor is the ability to take a joke, not make one—but we'll take either. See terms and share your best prank at **rd.com/prank.** Double points if it's a wholesome one!



How I Tried to STOP SNORING

I wanted a quick fix, even if it meant strapping a glorified bike pump to my face

BY *Jordan Foisy*
FROM **THE WALRUS**

ILLUSTRATION BY *Hayden Maynard*



I think of myself as a good sleeper. Give me a book and a horizontal position, and I could fall asleep strapped to the top of a bullet train. Sleep has been a constant ally, a friend. When I was a teen, it was a refuge. I used to pray for sleep; its temporary oblivion was a welcome respite from anxiety and obsessive thoughts. It was a pause—not a death, but close enough to it. Every time I fell asleep, there was a chance of resurrection, to wake up new.

My girlfriend, Allison, however, does not think I'm a good sleeper. She knows the truth. At night, I thrash around and scream. Occasionally, it sounds as if my breathing stops. Worst of all for her, I snore. Badly. She's shown me a video of it, and it's horrifying: My thin, wheezing inhalations are interrupted by a wrenching tear of a noise, like someone ripping a carpet inside a cave. It sounds like a Hans Zimmer score. It's awful.

We sometimes get into little fights when I wake up. She has had a terrible sleep—flipping my sleeping body over and plugging my nose, or occasionally smothering my face with a pillow—and is justifiably annoyed. She can't stay mad for long, though, because who is she mad at? Certainly, it was my body, not me, that was snoring. My lungs moving the air, my soft tissues: Those are the guilty parties. I wasn't even there!

I TRIED TREATING MY SNORING with the junk-drawer solution of purchasing every anti-snoring device available: nose strips, mouth guards, nasal spray—anything that promised snoring absolution. Nothing worked. Every time, there would be a glimmer of hope, when we would try to convince ourselves my snoring was better. But every time, it soon became clear, the only difference was that the top of my mouth was now shredded from the cheap plastic of the so-called snore guard.

Allison wanted me to see a doctor, but it's hard to take snoring seriously. It seems more like a joke, like a problem that a sitcom dad would have after getting electrocuted by Christmas decorations. It seems less like a health issue and more like a personality defect.

"Snoring occurs as our muscles in the upper airway relax so much that they narrow the airway," says Nick van den Berg, a PhD candidate in experimental psychology at the University of Ottawa and a member of the Canadian Sleep Society, a group of professionals dedicated to improving sleep quality. This is why snoring gets worse as we age, as our once taut and virile inner neck muscles become flabby and weak.

The real threat of bad snoring is that it could be a sign of obstructive sleep apnea, when a blockage in your airway causes you to wake up constantly. The lack of sleep—for you or your partner—can be a serious health risk, as insufficient sleep has been linked to heart disease, type 2 diabetes and Alzheimer's.

More than the health issues, sleep is essential to your functioning as a human being. "Sleep is key to memory consolidation," says Van den Berg. When we sleep, our brain organizes, processes and saves our memories. More than that, he says, sleep also enhances our memories. Van den Berg told me about studies in which the subjects are taught a basic skill before bed, and when they wake up, they not only remember the skill but also have actually improved upon it.

Sleep, then, is where we are forged. Every night, we throw our day-to-day experiences, memories and lessons into the kiln of sleep, let them bake for eight hours, ideally, and remove a better, stronger, fuller version of ourselves in the morning.

SO MY GIRLFRIEND WAS RIGHT to insist I deal with the problem, but I was resistant. I am in my mid-30s and haven't had a doctor since I was a kid. My health care subsisted on walk-in clinic visits and youthful hubris—a faith that things will work out and a belief that a problem doesn't really exist until you deal with it. But what really scared me off was that going to a doctor about my snoring would force me to confront how I live and its repercussions, and that my body has limits—almost like being shown a mirror to my mortality. Certainly not a face-to-face with the Grim Reaper, seeing who would blink first, but definitely footsies.

I HAD NO HOPE OF BLOOMING INTO A GUY WHO IS "SURPRISINGLY ATHLETIC."

It has been a tough year. A friend passed away suddenly and tragically. Then my grandmother followed. My chronic knee problem turned into a full-blown meniscus tear, dashing any hopes

of a late-life bloom into a guy who is "surprisingly athletic" and revealing a body that is eroding with time. My eyesight became distorted, and the eye doctor told me I had fluid under my retina, a condition called central serous chorioretinopathy. It's caused by stress. Also, I started seeing a therapist again. Within minutes, over Zoom, he told me I looked depressed.

It was a year that the space capsule of my youthful fantasy broke up on contact with an atmosphere of reality and repercussions, all soundtracked by some of the worst snoring you've ever heard.

OVERALL, I WOULD DESCRIBE MY SLEEPING POSITION AS MAXIMUM OBNOXIOUS.

But there are other things to be afraid of besides aging. And so, fearing a breakup or an unexplained disappearance (mine), I tried what Allison had been asking me to do. I went to a doctor.

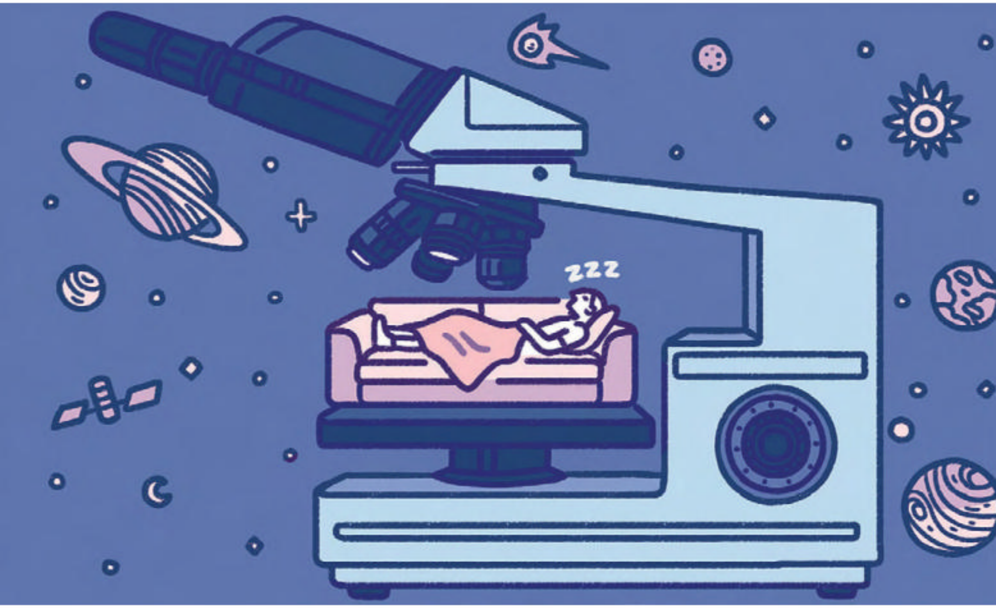
The doctor asked me how many alcoholic drinks I drank a week. I gave him a number that was high enough for me to know he should factor it into his diagnosis but low enough that I could say it without being embarrassed. He said that it was likely I had sleep apnea and that I should drink less and lose weight. He referred me to a sleep study to confirm the diagnosis.

To help with sleep apnea, I'd need a CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) machine, and to get the machine, I'd need the study results. A CPAP machine shoots a steady flow of pressurized air into your nose and mouth. It involves a hose, a mask that covers either your nose or mouth or both, and a head harness, resulting in the wearer looking like a cozy fighter pilot—like *Top Gun*'s Maverick if the undisclosed enemy country were your dreams.

I entered the hospital sleep clinic ready to get my sleep on. I felt nervous and excited and blisteringly sober. I had successfully adhered to the guidelines sent out by the clinic: no alcohol in the past 12 hours, no coffee in the last two, no naps. Free from its usual coating of hangover, too-late coffee and post-nap delirium, my mind was unadorned and hungry for answers.

A technician asked me a couple of questions, the most provocative being "What position do you sleep in?" I'm mostly a mix of side and stomach, with one leg pitched as if I'm doing a hurdle. Overall, though, I would describe my sleeping position as maximum obnoxious. My limbs are splayed as far as they can reach, and I continually thrash and roll from side to side in erratic and irregular movements. Basically, I sleep the way David Byrne dances.

I sat on my assigned bed, waiting for the sleep lab to begin its work. "Lab" was a misnomer. There were no beakers, or mad scientists, or stainless steel tanks with anonymous figures floating in green



fluid. Just a generic hospital room: infinite white walls; a thin, hard bed that made me feel as if I were lying on an H&M clothing shelf, and a pillow that had all the comfort and support of a bag of napkins. Worst of all, something was dripping onto an AC unit, producing a sharp, arrhythmic, metallic smack.

At 10:45 p.m., the technician began sticking electrodes to my body for the electroencephalogram, or EEG. This test measures brain waves without being invasive (cutting your head open). Created in 1924, it is still the gold standard for sleep studies. The technician also placed sensors on my arms and legs to measure my movement, and a sensor below my nose and a harness around my chest to measure my breathing.

I don't know what it says about my self-esteem, but I found being a specimen thrilling. The thrill quickly passed as I proceeded to have the worst sleep of my life.

THERE ARE TWO TYPES OF SLEEP: NREM and REM. Both are required for memory consolidation. NREM (non-rapid eye movement) sleep has three stages. Stage one is drifting off: those five to 10 minutes of drowsiness where it is hard to tell if you are asleep or not. Once you are out, the second stage begins. It is marked by slower brain waves and short, fast bursts of brain activity called spindles. The third stage



of NREM is slow-wave sleep. Your brain waves are now deep, long curves, similar, at times, to those seen in people under anesthesia. It is in these last two stages of NREM sleep that the body repairs itself on a cellular level from the wear and tear of the day.

Suddenly, the second act of sleep begins: REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. The brain explodes with activity; it appears awake. This is when most dreaming occurs, especially the intense, emotional genre of dreams—the ones that are like "I'm on a date, but there's a book report I didn't finish" or "I started playing hockey again, but I didn't realize that my skates are made of everyone I've ever disappointed." Your heart races, and beneath the eyelids, your eyes start to dart around wildly. It's not entirely clear why this happens. Van den Berg's favorite theory is that it is preparatory. As he puts it, "If NREM is recovery from the day before, REM seems to be preparation for the day ahead."

When you have a good night's sleep, these different stages are a harmonious repeating cycle. Of course, many things can disrupt this harmony: electric light, caffeine, a late night out or—as I found out—being covered in wires that precariously cling to your body with every toss and turn. Many thoughts can keep you up at night, and in the lab, I discovered a new one: "I sure hope that when

I turned over, I didn't ruin this experiment being performed on me." Another pressure point in the delicate dance of the sleep stages is if there is an unceasing arrhythmic drip onto an air conditioning unit the entire night.

AFTER TWO MONTHS, THE RESULTS OF THE SLEEP STUDY CAME IN.

I WAS WOKEN UP AT 5:30 A.M. after maybe two hours of gruel-thin snoozing. The wires were removed, and I strolled home in the dawn light, feeling as if my sleep-wake cycle and circadian rhythms were utterly and completely ruined.

After two months, the results of the study came in. It said I do not have sleep apnea. I have "mild primary snoring." As far as the study could tell, there is no particular reason for it. Aging, drinking too much, and rapidly deteriorating neck muscles are all it takes. The snoring was simply the sound of time catching up to me.

These were not the results I was looking for. I had been hoping for a condition, a disorder, something to point to whenever I indulged in a self-pity wallow. I wanted a quick fix, even if that meant strapping a glorified bike pump to my face. Instead, what I got were consequences, which coalesce and compound and reverberate, like a snore off the inner walls of your throat. There is no guarantee things will just work out: Injuries worsen, tragedy happens, your girlfriend gets fed up with you snoring. When you don't sleep, it takes days to recover.

My snoring has gotten worse since the study. Louder, more frequent. Thankfully, my girlfriend and I have figured out a staggered sleep schedule that seems to work. Also, I'm working out more, eating better and drinking less, because from this study, I learned that you are an accumulation of everything you did before. Things aren't just going to get better on their own. You have to take care of yourself and others. When you ate, what you learned, how you slept: These things matter. The person you are today builds from the person you were the day before. ■

© 2023, THE WALRUS. FROM "HOW I TRIED TO STOP SNORING, FIX MY SLEEP HABITS, AND CONFRONT MY MORTALITY," BY JORDAN FOISY, FROM THE WALRUS (MARCH 15, 2023), THEWALRUS.CA.

Oh, the (Unexciting) Places You'll Go!

Boring, Oregon, and Dull, Scotland, are sister cities. In 2017, they added Bland Shire, Australia, to their "League of Extraordinary Communities."

MENTALFLOSS.COM



NIGHTMARE AT THE NIGHTCLUB

WHEN THE SHOOTING STARTED, A COMBAT VETERAN'S LIFESAVING INSTINCTS KICKED IN

By Dave Philipps

FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES

ILLUSTRATION BY *Jeffrey Smith*





When shots rang out, Army veteran Richard Fierro tackled the shooter.

DANIEL BRENNER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Richard M. Fierro was at a table at Club Q with his wife, daughter and friends on a Saturday night last November when the sudden flash of gunfire ripped across the nightclub. His instincts, forged during four combat deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, instantly kicked in. *Fight back*, he told himself. *Protect your people*.

Fierro, 45, who spent almost 15 years as an Army officer and left as a major in 2013, charged through the chaos and tackled the gunman, beating him bloody with the shooter's own gun.

"I don't know exactly what I did. I just went into combat mode," Fierro said in the driveway of his Colorado Springs, Colorado, home just days after the shooting, an American flag hanging limp in the freezing air. "I just knew I had to kill this guy before he killed us."

Anderson Lee Aldrich, then 22, was arrested on charges of killing five people and wounding 18 more (four others were also injured) in a rampage that lasted only a few minutes. The death toll could have been much higher, officials said, if patrons of the bar had not stopped the shooter.

"He saved a lot of lives," John Suthers, then the mayor of Colorado Springs, said of Fierro. Suthers said he had spoken to Fierro and was struck by his humility. "I have never encountered a person who engaged in such heroic actions and was so humble about it."

IT WAS SUPPOSED to be a chill family night out. The combat veteran and his wife, Jess Fierro, joined their daughter, Kassandra, her longtime boyfriend, Raymond Green Vance, and two family friends.

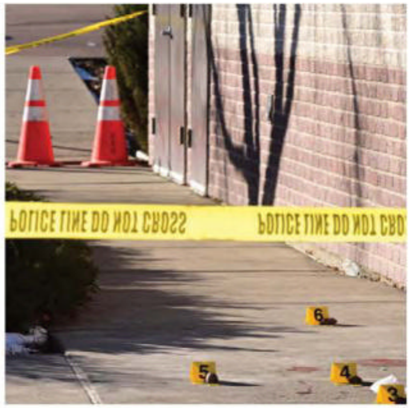
It was Fierro's first time at a drag show, and he was digging it. After all those years in the Army, he now relished his role as a civilian and a father, watching one of his daughter's old high school friends perform.

"These kids want to live that way, want to have a good time, have at it," he said as he described the night. "I'm happy about it because that is what I fought for, so they can do whatever the hell they want."

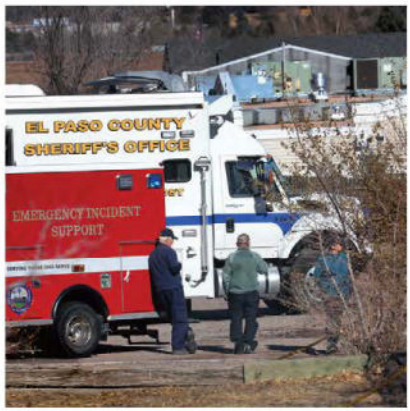
Fierro was trying to get better at going out. In Iraq and Afghanistan he'd been shot at, seen roadside bombs shred trucks in his platoon, and lost friends. He was twice awarded the Bronze Star.

The wars were both past and still present. There were things he would never forget. For a long time after he came home, crowds put him on edge. He couldn't help but be vigilant. In restaurants he sat against the wall, facing the door. No matter how much he tried to relax, part of him was always ready for an attack, like an itch that could not be scratched.

He was too often distrustful, quick to anger. It had been hard on his wife and daughter. He was working on it. There was medication and there were sessions with a psychologist. He got rid of all the



"I'M JUST A DUDE, A FAT OLD VET, BUT I KNEW I HAD TO DO SOMETHING."



Law enforcement officials marked evidence outside the club (top) and investigated the area (bottom).

TOP: HELEN H. RICHARDSON/MEDIANEWS GROUP/THE DENVER POST/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: SCOTT OLSON/GETTY IMAGES





Mourners gathered outside the Club Q nightclub to pay tribute to the victims.

guns in the house. He grew his hair out long and grew a long white goatee to distance himself from his days in uniform.

He and his wife run a successful local brewery called Atrevida Beer Co., and he had a warm relationship with his daughter and her longtime boyfriend. He also accepted that war would always be with him.

But that night at Club Q, he was not thinking of war at all. The women were dancing. He was joking with his friends. Then the shooting started.

It was a staccato of flashes by the front door, the familiar sound of small-arms fire. Fierro knew it too well. Without thinking, he hit the floor, pulling his friend down with him.

Bullets sprayed across the bar, smashing bottles and glasses. People screamed. Fierro looked up and saw a figure as big as a bear, easily more than 300 pounds, wearing body armor and carrying a rifle a lot like the one he had carried in Iraq. The shooter was moving through the bar toward a door leading to a patio where dozens of people had fled.

The long-suppressed instincts of a platoon leader surged back to life. Fierro raced across the room, grabbed the gunman by a handle on the back of his body armor, pulled him to the floor and jumped on top of him.

"Was he shooting at the time? Was he about to shoot? I don't know," Fierro said. "I just knew I had to take him down."

The two crashed to the floor. The gunman's military-style rifle clattered just out of their reach. Fierro started to go for it, but then saw the gunman come up with a pistol in his other hand.

"I grabbed the gun out of his hand

FROM LEFT: SCOTT OLSON/GETTY IMAGES; HELEN H. RICHARDSON/MEDIANEWS GROUP/THE DENVER POST/GETTY IMAGES





CECILIA SANCHEZ/GETTY IMAGES

and just started hitting him in the head, over and over," Fierro said.

As he held the man down and slammed the pistol down on his skull, Fierro started barking orders. Using a string of expletives, he yelled for another club patron to grab the rifle, then told the patron to start kicking the gunman in the face. A dancer was passing by, and Fierro ordered her to stomp the attacker with her high heels. The whole time, Fierro said, he kept pummeling the shooter with the pistol while screaming at him.

FIERRO YELLED AS IF HE WERE BACK IN COMBAT: "CASUALTIES! CASUALTIES! I NEED A MEDIC HERE NOW!"

What allowed him to throw aside all fear and act? He said he has no idea. Probably those old instincts of war, which had burdened him for so long at home, suddenly had a place now that something like war had come to his hometown.

"In combat, most of the time nothing happens, but it's that mad minute, that mad minute, and you are tested in that minute. It becomes habit," he said. "I don't know how I got the weapon away from that guy—no idea. I'm just a dude. I'm a fat old vet, but I knew I had to do something."

When police arrived a few minutes later, the gunman was no longer struggling. Fierro, himself covered in blood, feared that he had killed him.

Fierro got up and frantically lurched around in the dark, looking for his family. He spotted his friends on the floor. One had been shot several times in the



The five people killed in the shooting were (from left) Kelly Loving, Derrick Rump, Ashley Paugh, Raymond Green Vance and Daniel Aston.

JOANNA KULESZA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

chest and arm. Another had been shot in the leg.

As more police filed in, Fierro started yelling as if he were back in combat. “Casualties! Casualties! I need a medic here now!” He yelled to the police that the scene was clear, the shooter was down but people needed help. He took tourniquets from a young police officer and put them on his bleeding friends. He tried to speak calmly to them as he worked, telling them they would be OK.

He spied his wife and daughter on the edge of the room and was about to go to them when he was tackled.

Officers rushing into the chaotic scene had spotted him, a blood-spattered man with a handgun. Not knowing whether he was a threat, they put Fierro in handcuffs and locked him in the back of a police car for what seemed like more than an hour. He screamed and pleaded to be let go so that he could see his family.

Eventually, Fierro was freed. He located his wife and daughter, both of whom had minor injuries, and went to the hospital with them. His friends were there in much more serious condition. But, thankfully, they were all alive.

But his daughter’s boyfriend was nowhere to be found. In the dark and disarray, they had lost him. They drove back to the club, searching for him. They circled familiar streets, hoping

they would find him walking home. But there was no sign of him.

Then the family got a call late Sunday from the young man's mother. He had died in the shooting.

When Fierro heard, he said, he held his daughter and cried.

In part he cried because he knew what lay ahead. The families of the dead, the people who were shot, had now



been in war, as he had. They would struggle as he and so many of his combat buddies had. They would ache with misplaced vigilance. They would lash out in anger, never be able to scratch the itch of fear, be torn by the longing to forget and the urge to always remember.

"My little girl, she screamed, and I was crying with her," he said. "Driving home from the hospital, I told them, 'Look, I've gone through this before, and downrange, when this happens, you just get out on the next patrol. You need to get it out of your mind.' That is how you cured it. You cured it by doing more. Eventually you get home safe. But here I worry there is no next patrol. It's harder to cure. You are already home." ■

Editor's note: On June 26, Anderson Lee Aldrich pleaded guilty to five counts of murder in the first degree, 46 counts of attempted murder in the first degree and no contest to two bias-motivated crimes. Aldrich received five consecutive life sentences without the possibility of parole and 46 consecutive 48-year sentences.

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SCOTT OLSON/GETTY IMAGES

Rough Day Remedy

This lovely little ritual was submitted to *Well,* a *New York Times* newsletter:

If anyone in the family comes home after a rough day, they can wearily announce "sardine can." That is a signal for everyone to immediately rush upstairs, including the person who issued the call. Then we all pile into bed under the covers and stay there, packed cozily, until the person feels better.

NYTIMES.COM



NATURE

Falling into Fall

Embrace the uncertainty of this crisp, colorful season of change

BY *Erik Vance*

FROM **THE NEW YORK TIMES**

Whether you like it or not, fall is here. Soon the weather will get colder, the leaves will die and the nights will stretch longer than the days. Another year is dying; that's just how it goes.

At least, that's the way autumn often is cast—as a time of aging and decay. William Shakespeare called it "Death's second self," when youth burns to ashes. More recently, it's become a time to acknowledge our existential dread.

For many of those who struggle with seasonal depression in the winter months, the fall is the beginning of their symptoms. A few small studies even suggest that if you are ruminative, or deeply preoccupied with your thoughts, in the autumn, you may be at more risk for depression in the winter. Changing the clocks in the fall is associated with depressive episodes (changing them back in the spring is not). It's no wonder the season has so many celebrations to attempt to keep our spirits up.

Psychologists say that the feelings that often crop up in autumn stem from our discomfort with change, and an anxiety and uncertainty about what that change will bring. The melancholy we feel is a form of grief, mourning the lost sunlight, the ease of summertime and the greenery that abounds in the warm weather.

But it's not all bad. Fall also brings with it bright, brisk days, pumpkin patches and cozy sweaters. Somewhere in the crunching leaves, crackling fires and chilly air, you might locate a feeling of possibility, even electricity.

And all these things—the anxiety, the promise and even the rumination—make it the ideal season to build resilience and practice mindfulness.

A Season of Resilience



For Jelena Kecmanovic, the founder of Arlington/DC Behavior Therapy Institute, the fall is reminiscent of exploring the mountains near her former home in Sarajevo, in what was then Yugoslavia. She spent the first 20 years of her life there, during one of that country's most prosperous eras. But in the 1990s, she was forced to flee during a bloody four-year siege of her city.

Today, she is an expert in resilience, a concept centering on the capacity to adapt to challenging life experiences. Kecmanovic describes autumn as the season when we can work on our acceptance of uncertainty—embracing that unsettled feeling we may have as we move out of our warm-weather routines.

Psychologists have found that the thought of change underlies a great deal of anxiety. Some of us struggle with "intolerance of uncertainty," as experts call it, more than others. This tendency was first named in the 1990s by a team of Canadian psychologists and has since been identified as a risk factor for poor mental health.

"A massive amount of research has

ILLUSTRATIONS BY *Anna Godeassi*

been showing that intolerance for distress, for discomfort, for impermanence, for uncertainty, predicts bad outcomes in the long run," Kecmanovic says.

But intolerance of uncertainty is a part of being human; everyone has it on some level. And it's changeable. One way to build tolerance is to lean into it—to cultivate uncertainty rather than run away from it.

"The avoidance of suffering produces suffering," says Kelly Wilson, an emeritus professor of psychology at the University of Mississippi. A feeling of exhilaration can also come from experiencing something new or uncertain, which in turn builds resilience, Kecmanovic says.

Leaning in to uncertainty means putting aside your routines and your planning, which Kecmanovic calls "cushions that make us feel like we have control." Bike through a neighborhood you've never been to—without a map. Set out during one of these lengthening autumn nights to find somewhere dark enough to do some stargazing. Go for a walk on a day when it just might rain.

You might get lost or soaked or be unable to see any stars. You might feel uncomfortable or as if you're wasting your time. But those small moments of uncertainty, Kecmanovic says, will build exposure to, a tolerance toward and perhaps even an appreciation of times when you don't know what's ahead and feel out of control.

"It's the opposite of 'I have assurance of how it's going to be in the next half an hour or next day or next year,'" she says. "It's like, 'In this moment I'm alive. And that's enough.'"



A Season of Mindfulness

There are quieter ways, as well, to engage with the changing of the seasons. Another strategy that experts suggest for soothing seasonal anxiety is to step back and simply observe the world around you. Quietly sit on a park bench and watch a tree drop its leaves, for instance.

Kecmanovic says that weaving bigger themes of nature and purpose into quiet moments of meditation can help calm your sense of anxiety around short-term uncertainty and put it into a broader perspective.

For Jana Long, co-founder of the Black Yoga Teacher's Alliance in Baltimore, fall is a time for *samyama*, a concept in yoga referring to, among other things, the meditative practice of observing an object and becoming

absorbed in it. Sometimes Long looks at the grass after the final mowing of the year and spends some time thinking about what that means for a plant. Other times, she says, she examines the roses in her garden that need pruning before winter, imagining what they need and how they will change.

She says that in such moments, it's important to stop thinking, analyzing or having internal conversations about work or troubles or even whatever you're witnessing. A teacher once demonstrated this idea to her by placing a glass of water on the table. He started by saying he saw the glass.

"And then he continued to talk about how the mind shifts: 'I like the glass.' See, now that's something else. And then, 'I want the glass.' That's something else," she says. "But can you just *see* the glass? That's practicing samyama."

This kind of mindfulness has been shown again and again to reduce stress and increase well-being. It can enhance your workouts and help you focus at work and cope with an uncertain world. For some, practicing mindfulness can shift how they see their lives in a big way. For most of us, it's a useful tool to find a sense of peace when we need it.

It's also perfectly suited for a cool autumn day, when the end of the year is in view and the world around you is turning in on itself.

"For me, it's also about harvesting what has occurred in the year," says Larry Ward, a meditation teacher and the founder of The Lotus Institute in Pataskala, Ohio. "What has this summer brought to you and your life? What has this spring brought to you?"

"Harvesting" means taking stock of the year (or years) behind you. And to do this, you must collect the memories without judgment or self-loathing. For instance, Wilson, of the University of Mississippi, says he acted poorly the last time he saw his brother before his untimely death. But rather than push that memory away, he holds it as a part of that relationship.

"I keep the thorn to keep the rose," he says.

Autumn will probably always hold some whisper of decay and mortality for humans. But embracing that sadness is important.

If you're always trying to avoid difficult feelings, you might end up also cutting yourself off "from love and richness and sweetness," Wilson says. "This is how life is: sweet and sad, poured from the same vessel in equal measure." ■

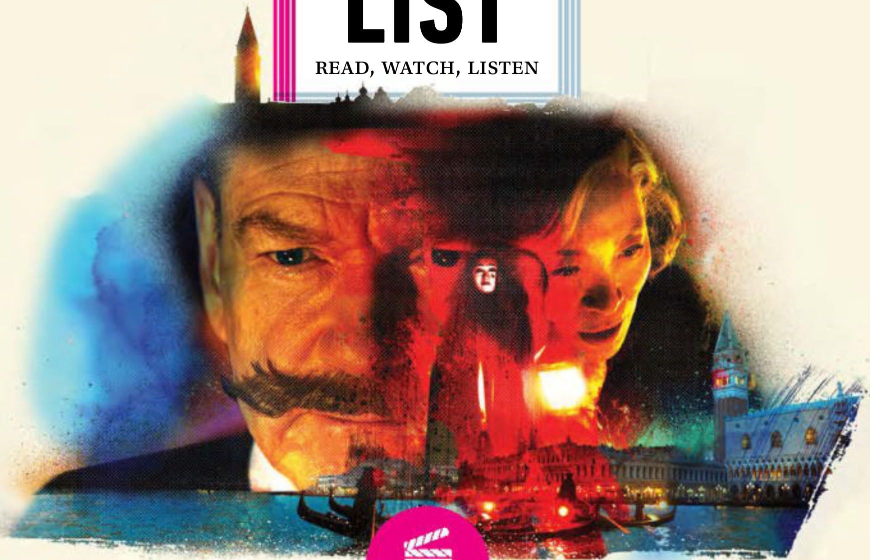
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As a '90s kid ...

... it blows my mind the most famous Culkin and Olsens are Kieran and Elizabeth.

@JILLKRAJEWSKI

The RD
LIST
READ, WATCH, LISTEN



FILM

A Haunting in Venice

Starring and directed by Kenneth Branagh

KENNETH BRANAGH dons Hercule Poirot's famed mustache once more in a supernatural twist on Agatha Christie's *Hallowe'en Party*. To heighten the fear factor, the setting has moved from a soiree in the English countryside to a seance at a haunted Venice palazzo. That's where the Belgian sleuth tries to figure out who murdered a guest (Michelle Yeoh, Tina Fey, Kelly Reilly and Jamie Dornan play suspects). It doesn't take a celebrated detective to deduce that Branagh has a good thing going with Christie whodunits: This is his third remake after hits *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017) and *Death on the Nile* (2022). This time, "Poirot has to face some ghosts across this long dark night of the soul in this entrapment," Branagh told *The Hollywood Reporter*. "But inside that, we want to enter, entertain, divert, compel and scare." *(In theaters Sept. 15)*
—Mara Reinstein

20TH CENTURY STUDIOS (4). NOUN PROJECT (FILM ICON)

ILLUSTRATION BY *Tim Marrs*

TV

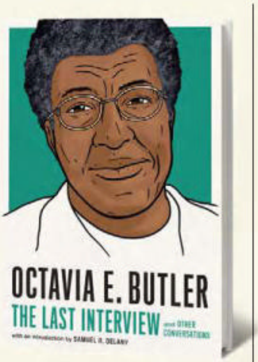
The American Buffalo

Directed by Ken Burns

Is there any contemporary creator who understands the soul of America better than filmmaker Ken Burns? In his newest documentary, Burns trains his lens on one of our country's beloved icons: the buffalo. Once, tens of millions of magnificent bison (the North American species) roamed from the Idaho Rockies to the Florida flats; today, they number around 350,000, most descendants of just 77 animals protected at the start of the 20th century. Burns's look back at the bison's sacred relationship with Native Americans, their history and lore, and the people who saved them from near-extinction is fascinating. Even more fascinating is his look forward, an optimistic glimpse at what we can learn from their conservation to protect more of the nature we love. *(Premieres Oct. 16 and 17 on PBS) —Caroline Fanning*



COURTESY OF HARVEY PAYNE. NOUN PROJECT (TV ICON)



Octavia E. Butler: The Last Interview

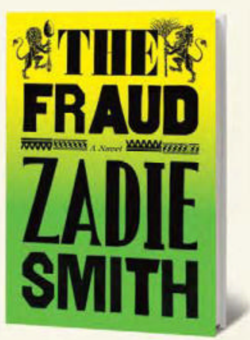
Introduction by Samuel R. Delany

For years, *The Last Interview* book series has compiled the sharpest, most essential conversations ever published, including interviews with Julia Child, Kurt Cobain, Fred Rogers and other luminaries. *Parable of the Sower* author Octavia E. Butler takes center stage in the newest edition, a volume of 10 interviews (three never before published) offering an entrancing look into the mind of the legendary science fiction writer as she dominated a genre with scarce representation for Black women. Fans of Butler and the genre will be delighted. *—Adrienne Farr*

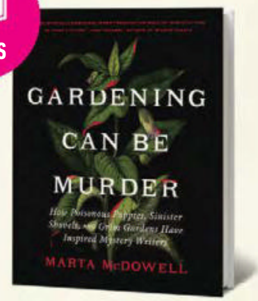
The Fraud

By Zadie Smith

One of our greatest living writers returns with her first novel since 2016's *Swing Time*. Here, Zadie Smith takes her first crack at historical fiction, turning to the Tichborne trial, a real-life legal case from the Victorian era. Twelve years after his disappearance at sea, a man returns to England claiming to be the long-lost heir to the Tichborne family fortune. A lengthy trial to determine the veracity of his claim ensues, as told mostly through the perspective of Eliza Touchet, a housekeeper who becomes possessed by the case (and one witness in particular). Smith's succinct chapters of a few paragraphs or less make the 464-page tome feel almost snappy. *—CF*



BOOKS



Gardening Can Be Murder

By Marta McDowell

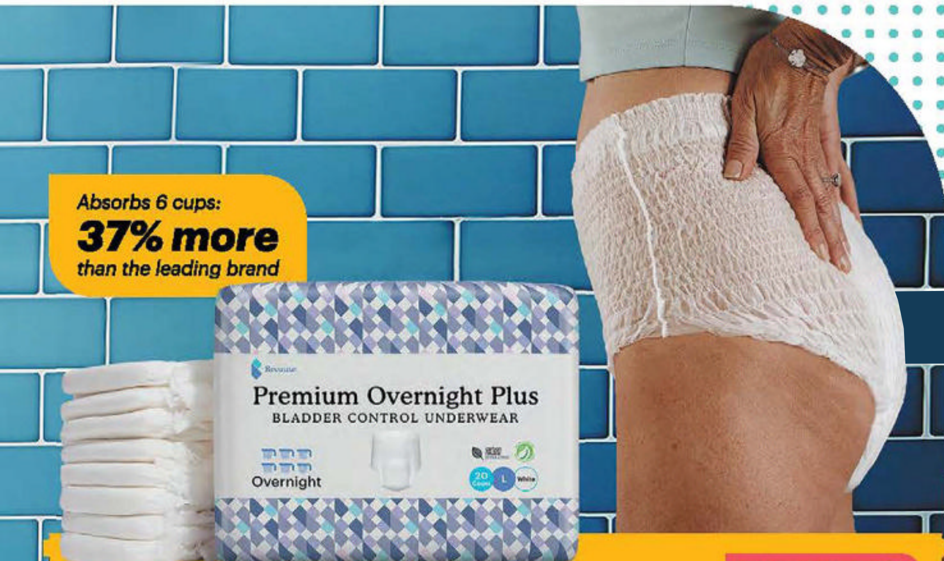
Citing everything from hemlock to nightshade and pointy spades to shallow graves, writer and horticulturist Marta McDowell digs up the dirt on an unsuspecting source of inspiration for the mystery genre: gardens. *Gardening Can Be Murder* marries McDowell's encyclopedic knowledge of plants and of the murder-mystery genre. She documents every shady gardener and poisoned tea, consulting literary giants both classic and current along the way. Expect references to Poe and Christie, as well as conversations with Ruth Ware (*The Woman in Cabin 10*) and Cynthia Riggs (A Martha's Vineyard Mystery series). *—CF*

OCTAVIA BUTLER: *THE LAST INTERVIEW*, PUBLISHED BY MELVILLE HOUSE BOOKS. PENGUIN PRESS (*THE FRAUD*). LAUREN SMITH (*GARDENING CAN BE MURDER*). THE NOUN PROJECT (BOOK ICON)

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Brain GAMES

SHARPEN YOUR MIND

Fact or Fiction?

MEDIUM Determine whether each statement is fact or fiction. To reveal the solution to the bonus question at the bottom, write the letters indicated by your responses in the corresponding numbered blanks. Turn the page upside down for the answers.

1. Viking helmets had horns.



FACT: C **FICTION: F**

2. Reese's Peanut Butter Cups are America's bestselling candy.

FACT: I **FICTION: H**

3. Ulysses S. Grant was not his real name.

FACT: R **FICTION: A**

4. Einstein failed math as a child.



FACT: T **FICTION: E**

5. After Russia, France is the next largest country in Europe.

FACT: T **FICTION: F**

6. "Thriller" was the most expensive music video to shoot.



FACT: Y **FICTION: L**

7. Canadians, too, celebrate a holiday called Thanksgiving.

FACT: I **FICTION: G**

8. Humans are the only animals to go through menopause.

FACT: P **FICTION: E**

9. There's a basketball court in the Supreme Court building.



FACT: S **FICTION: T**

BONUS QUESTION Which app uses artificial intelligence to transcribe for you? (Need help? Turn to "AI Means Never Having to Say Goodbye" on page 68.)

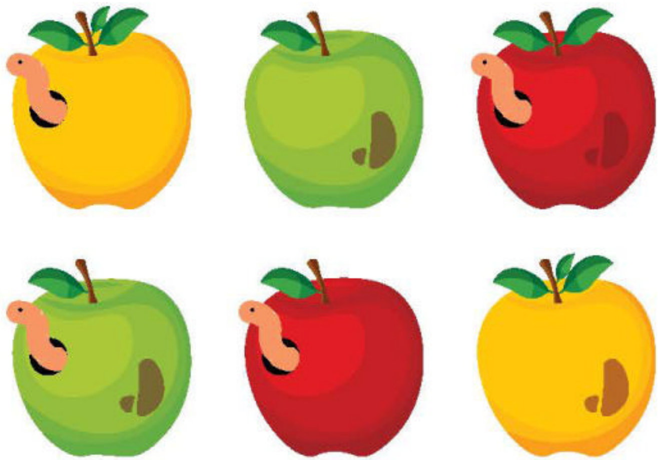
___	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	___
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Answers: 1. Fiction; there's no sign that Vikings really wore that well-known style. **2.** Fact. **3.** Fact; he was born Hiram Ulysses Grant. **4.** Fiction; Einstein himself dismissed this claim. **5.** Fiction; Ukraine is. **6.** Fiction; "Scream" was (still by Michael Jackson, with his sister Janet) in 1995, with a budget of $7 million (almost $14 million today). **7.** Fact; but theirs is in October. **8.** Fiction; whales do as well. **9.** Fact; it's called the Highest Court in the Land. **Bonus Question:** Fireflies.

EMILY GOODMAN (FACT OR FICTION). NOUN PROJECT (4)

Sorting Apples

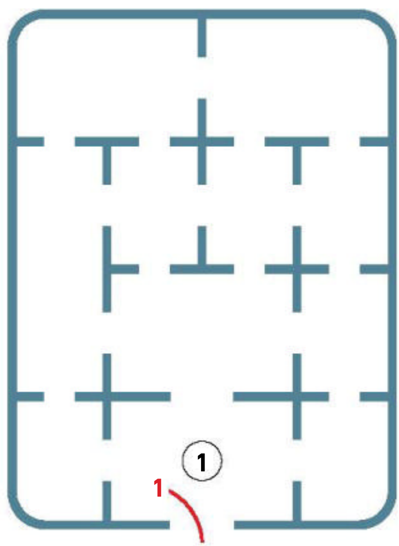
EASY Which of these apples has a characteristic that's different from all the others?



Museum Tour

MEDIUM On a visit to the Museum of Stubbornness, Alex picks up a guided audio tour that leads visitors through the rooms in a prescribed order. In the spirit of the museum, Alex decides to pick his own route. Both the official route and Alex's route go through every room once, with no backtracking and no rooms skipped. Using the clues below, reconstruct both routes on the map. (North is at the top of the map.)

1. Other than room #1, Alex doesn't visit any room in the intended order of the tour.
2. The recording tells visitors to head east from room #1.
3. Alex's fourth room occupies a corner of the building. He left this room heading south.
4. The guided tour's fourth room has more doors than its fifth room.



EMILY GOODMAN (SORTING APPLES). YULIIA KONAKHOVSKA/GETTY IMAGES (APPLES). DARREN RIGBY (MUSEUM TOUR)

A + B = C
B + C = D
D + E = G
C + G = F
E + H = F

It All Adds Up

DIFFICULT Each letter from A through H has one of the eight values: 1, 2, 8, 9, 10, 12, 19 or 21. No two letters have the same value. Determine which number goes with each letter to make the equations correct.

FRASER SIMPSON

For more Brain Games, go to **RD.COM/BRAINGAMES.**

For answers, turn to **PAGE 111.**

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WORD POWER

Don't get all *verklempt*, but this issue we're celebrating the many expressive words English has borrowed from Yiddish. So have some *chutzpah* and go for it, but skip the *schmaltz*. Whether you're saying "Yay!" or "*Oy vey*!" by the end, you can find the answers on the next page.

BY *Mary-Liz Shaw*

1. schmutz *n.*
(shmuts)
A dirt
B joke
C deli meat

2. schlep *v.*
(shlep)
A run
B haul
C pass through

3. meshuggener *n.*
(muh-'shu-ge-ner)
A cute child
B foolish person
C important date

4. mensch *n.*
(mentsh)
A payment
B talent
C person of integrity

5. nosh *v.*
(nahsh)
A explain
B snack
C forget

6. bubbe *n.*
('buh-bee)
A grandmother
B little one
C hot drink

7. kvell *v.*
(kvel)
A walk noisily
B cry
C rejoice

8. bissel *n.*
('bi-sl)
A little bit
B letter
C secret

9. shonda *n.*
('shahn-duh)
A assistance
B star
C scandal

10. plotz *v.*
(plahts)
A misunderstand
B burst with emotion
C hide

11. shtick *n.*
(shtik)
A weird idea
B ditty
C comic routine

12. schlock *adj.*
(shlahk)
A shoddy
B entertaining
C funny

13. kvetch *v.*
(kvech)
A complain
B laugh
C rush

14. mishegoss *n.*
('mish-i-goss)
A craziness
B bundle of papers
C worrying trend

15. schmooze *v.*
(shmooz)
A play
B chat
C introduce



Schlemiel, Schlimazel

Any fan of the 1970s sitcom *Laverne & Shirley* can recite the little ditty at the show's opening: "Five, six, seven, eight, *schlemiel, schlimazel, hasenpfeffer* incorporated." While fun to say, it means *bupkis* (nothing). Both *schlemiel* and *schlimazel* are Yiddish for an unlucky person, with *schlemiel* suggesting more of an incompetent or a bungler. And *hasenpfeffer* is a German rabbit stew.

Word Power ANSWERS

1. schmutz (A) *dirt*
Only after my job interview did I realize I had schmutz on my face.

2. schlep (B) *haul*
Heavy rain made schlepping my groceries even harder.

3. meshuggener (B) *foolish person*
"He's a meshuggener if he thinks he can park there," Marta scoffed.

4. mensch (C) *person of integrity*
Being called a mensch is a huge compliment.

5. nosh (B) *snack*
Every Sunday, Sophie and Ellen meet at the coffee shop to nosh and gossip.

6. bubbe (A) *grandmother*
Though oatmeal raisin cookies aren't his favorite, Gordon often makes the recipe his bubbe passed down to him.

7. kvell (C) *rejoice*
Tova was kvelling when her daughter graduated at the top of her class.

8. bissel (A) *little bit*
Aunt Clara had a big breakfast and now just wants to eat a bissel for lunch.

9. shonda (C) *scandal*
"Did you hear about that bank manager who stole deposits?" David asked. "What a shonda!"

10. plotz (B) *burst with emotion*
Don't plotz, but it looks like the dog soiled the carpet again.

11. shtick (C) *comic routine*
Mike quit touring and is doing his shtick in Las Vegas now.

12. schlock (A) *shoddy*
Dad bought all these schlock souvenirs during a family vacation to Myrtle Beach.

13. kvetch (A) *complain*
No matter how hard we try to please some people, they manage to find something to kvetch about.

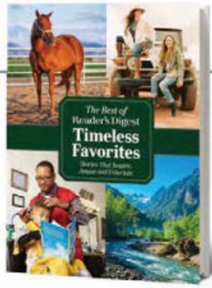
14. mishegoss (A) *craziness*
Amid the mishegoss of rushing to pack, Sofia forgot her toothbrush.

15. schmooze (B) *chat*
The annual convention is a great time to schmooze with industry bigwigs.

Vocabulary Ratings

9 & BELOW: Meh
10-12: Mishmash
13-15: Mazel tov!

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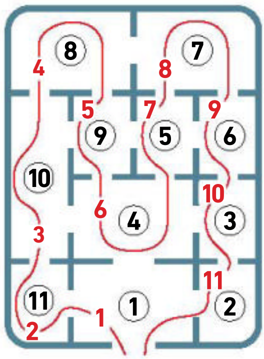
ANSWERS

BRAIN GAMES

(pages 107-108)

Sorting Apples
The apple on the upper right is the only one with two leaves on its stem.

Museum Tour
The circled numbers are the guided tour, and the red line is Alex's path.



It All Adds Up
A = 8, B = 1, C = 9, D = 10, E = 2, F = 21, G = 12, H = 19

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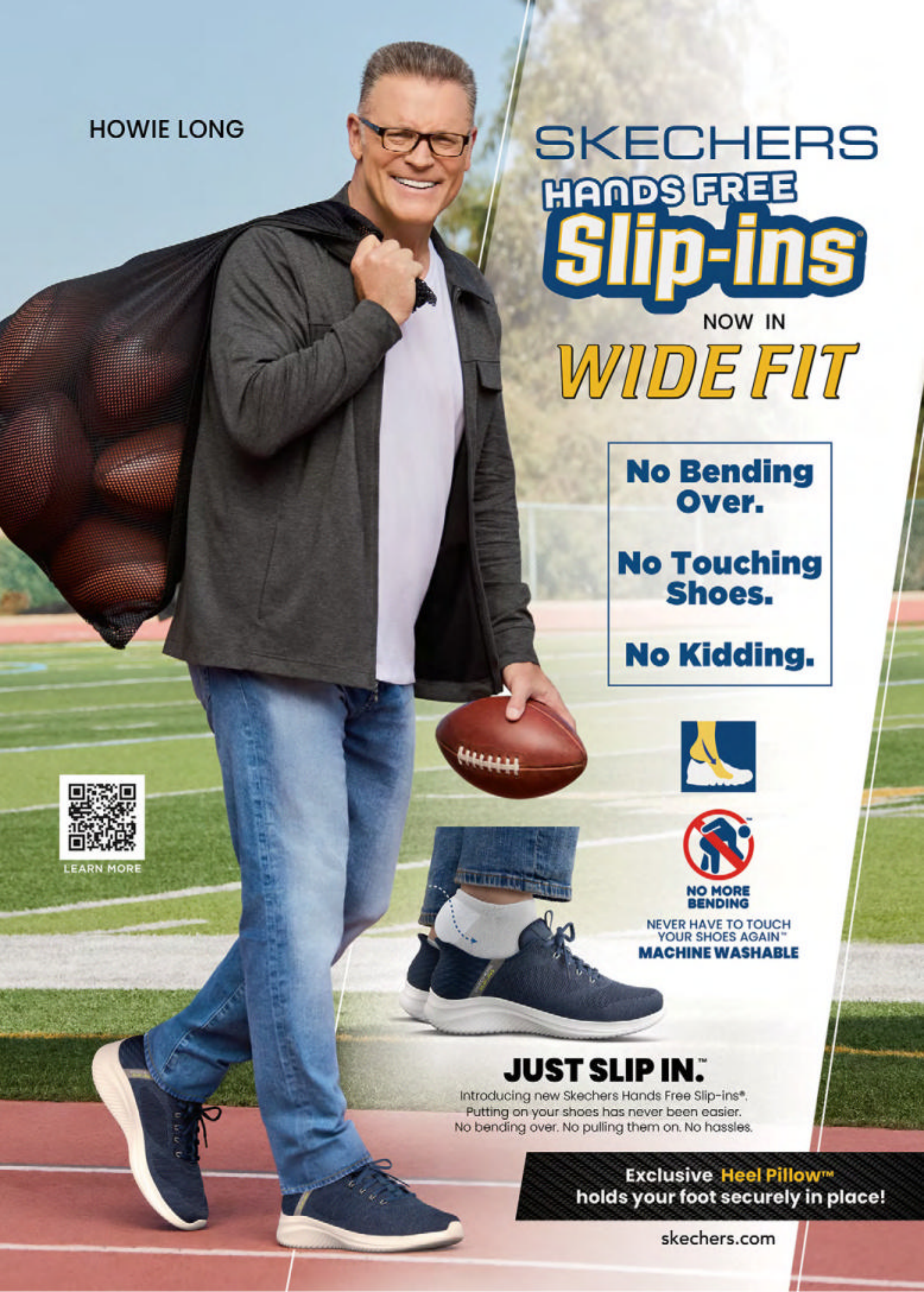


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